Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Chapter 1

Revolution (n.) -

1. The completion of a course; a full circle.

2. A sudden, radical, or complete change.

* * *

There once was a girl named Kagome...

Hiking up a sunny mountainside, surrounded by her friends from college and a decade removed from her last moments in the past, Kagome suddenly felt the familiar and unexpected creeping cold of youki poured over her naked brain, seeping down through her throat to settle sullenly around her heart.

The shock was so great that she stumbled against a rock and nearly cracked a bone in her pelvis.

"Ow!" she cried, pushing herself away from the offending boulder and landing heavily on her unwounded hip, hand flying to her side to rub the injured spot. She went through the mundane motions to soothe her wound, but in her head she was instinctively concentrating, seeking out the source of demonic power, trying to get a lock on the position and assess the danger. She was dimly aware that ahead of her on the trail her three friends had whipped around at her utterance.

"Kagome!" exclaimed Arisu, wide eyes filled with concern. "Are you all right?" Without waiting for an answer, the other girl skidded down the rocky trail to land in front of her. "What happened?" she demanded, crouching in front of Kagome.

Shaking her head, Kagome tried to control her breathing. The youki was becoming neither stronger nor weaker, so the youkai - how? was the question in the back of her mind, how could there be youkai here and now? - was not moving. It was powerful, but muted. Kagome blinked and focused on the face of her friend and tried to smile. "Nothing," she said. "I just slipped, that's all, and I hit that stupid boulder."

"Do you think you can walk?" Kayoko piped up from further up the trail.

Kagome nodded distractedly, pressing her fingers into her hip and wincing a little at the dull pain that answered her probing. If nothing else, the sensation served to ground her a little more, and she worked her tongue around her answer. "Nothing's broken, just banged up pretty badly."

Arisu batted Kagome's hand away impatiently and pressed her own fingers to the spot, seeking out injury.

"Arisu! I'm a med student, just like you," Kagome said, forcing herself to laugh. The feeling of youki was still there, but it seemed there was no immediate threat, so she allowed herself to

focus on the situation at hand. "Stop that! I can tell if my own bones are broken," she scolded her friends.

"Yes, but would you tell us?" Arisu replied. She grinned the little half-grin that she flashed when she found humor in something that was otherwise unamusing. "Remember when you came down with pneumonia and refused to go to the hospital because midterms were coming up? You're lucky it was only walking pneumonia and not a more serious infection."

"Ahaha..." Kagome replied, flushing with embarrassment. She squirmed with discomfort. "Er, that was an isolated incident."

From further up the trail, she heard Kayoko give a snort, and Miyu giggled like a madwoman.

"The cut on your arm?" Miyu piped up. "That you said was just a scratch?"

"It was," Kagome insisted. "How was I to know that it would degenerate into a staph infection?" Studiously ignoring the cold that had invaded her chest, she gingerly drew her feet beneath her and stood, testing her injured joint. "Ooooh," she hissed as another wave of dull pain spread from the already-forming lump.

Arisu sighed and rolled her eyes. "Right," she said, popping up from her place on the ground with a bouncy intensity that made Kagome's hip hurt more just by watching it, "I'm taking you back."

"But what about our hiking trip?" Kagome insisted, trying to focus. "I thought we all needed this to unwind. I'll be fine, I promise!"

The chilly feel of youki was tugging her up the trail, drowning out the voices of her friends. Kagome kept her face carefully schooled in a worried wince, but her mind was whirling with both curiosity and incredulity. Could there be a youkai just up the path? Could one of them have survived?

But no – it couldn't be possible.

They all died long ago, she thought. They died. They're gone.

There has to be another explanation for this.

The feel of youki pooled in her stomach, and Kagome pressed a hand to her belly as she teetered on the edge of nausea.

From far away, Arisu was shaking her head. "Kagome, you are going to listen to me," she was saying. "We can relax just as well at my flat, eating ice cream and watching movies. And we can get some ice on that hip."

Kagome turned her head as she opened her mouth to protest, but the words died in her throat. Arisu had her hands fisted at her waist, and her eyebrows were drawn in an angry, protective frown that brooked no argument. It was a very motherly look that Arisu pulled out when she

was at her most stubborn, and Kagome felt herself warm a little, and the chill in her belly waned slightly.

Kagome concentrated on the emotion, and the feeling of youki faded.

She blinked hard as the world righted itself, and she turned to Arisu and mustered a wan half-smile. "Oh, all right," she agreed. "I'm really sorry about this," she said to Kayoko and Miyu, who were already making their way back down to her. "I didn't mean to - "

"Kagome, do be quiet," Kayoko said as she reached her. "At least in front of the TV, we won't be eaten alive by bugs."

"No snakes, either," Miyu interjected, and Kagome felt a smile threaten to bubble up. Miyu, never fond of reptiles to begin with, had nearly fallen off the steep side of the trail due to a snake scare a scant five minutes earlier.

Arisu gave voice to Kagome's amusement with a badly-muffled snort. She forcibly looped Kagome's arm around her shoulders before remarking sardonically, "Oh, please. It was just a little one."

"Incorrect," Miyu replied.

"I saw it, too," Kayoko reminded Miyu. "It really was just a little one."

"It was not!"

Ignoring the small fight breaking out behind her, Kagome laughed nervously at Arisu. "Um, you don't have to do this," Kagome told her friend as they started back down the mountain trail.

"Shh," Arisu told her patronizingly. "No need to fret. Arisu will take care of you."

Rolling her eyes, Kagome allowed herself to be escorted the half-hour back down the mountainside and to Miyu's car, where, after a brief scuffle between Kayoko and Miyu as to who would drive, they set out for Arisu's apartment in the city.

Kagome clambered stiffly into her seat, but she could still feel the ghost of a demon and the memory of things past plucking at her heart and whispering in her ear. She was quiet all the way home.

* * *

Kayoko poked one long finger into Kagome's side. "Earth to Kagome! Come in!"

With a flash of irritation and guilt Kagome realized that she had spaced out again for the fifth time since the movie had started. Her mind felt scattered; she just couldn't concentrate on the pictures playing across the screen, and her chocolate marshmallow ice cream had since melted into a cool ice cream soup. "What?" she said, a bit too harshly.

Kayoko gave her a look that clearly said 'chill out,' but out loud she laughed. "Have the aliens brought you back yet?"

"No," Kagome replied. "And we're having a wonderful time in my head."

Gently, Arisu knocked on Kagome's skull, and then pressed her ear to it. "Hm," she said thoughtfully. "I don't hear any sort of party going on. Perhaps you've found an imaginary boyfriend and aren't telling us?"

Kagome heaved a sigh. She loved her friends - without them she would never have survived her first three years of medical school - but sometimes they just tried too hard. There never seemed to be enough time to be alone with her thoughts. No sooner would Kagome settle down in a darkened room with a cup of tea to think than Arisu would call and ask her for help on homework, or Miyu would call to complain about her latest boyfriend, or Kayoko would show up unannounced to drag her to the newest club. It was a difficult, and often lonely, position in which to be - it was hard loving people that she didn't even like most of the time.

Shaking her head, she gently removed Arisu's arms from around her neck. "I'm just tired, that's all," she assured them, shifting uncomfortably on the sofa.

"You've been acting strange ever since you took that spill," Miyu pointed out from her spot on the floor. "Sure you didn't hit your head?"

Kagome stuck out her tongue. "Quite sure," she said, but her voice was quiet and lost in the laughter.

Grabbing the remote control, Arisu unpaused the film and they settled back. Kagome tucked her feet beneath her on the sofa and forced herself to concentrate. The movie was some supposedly deep and interesting art house film that had won a metric ton of awards in France, though Kagome could not see why. She suspected that the fact she had spaced out during the first half of the movie was severely hampering her enjoyment of the last half. Regardless, she at least found that it distracted her from the empty place in her chest, but still breathed a sigh of mingled relief and resignation when it was over.

Arisu switched off the television, and Kagome stood and stretched. Miyu and Kayoko had apparently also found the movie too pretentious and were snoring gently, drooling into Arisu's raw silk cushions. "What did you think?" Arisu asked, padding over to the television and popping out the DVD.

"It was pretty good," Kagome said, hoping that there would be no follow up questions. Tired and still nursing a sore hip, she just wanted to go home and climb into bed.

"I liked it! I think it was a really interesting exploration!" Arisu gushed. Arisu fancied herself a film buff since she had once dated a film student of dubious talent.

Don't ask, don't ask, Kagome told herself. You'll regret it.

She asked anyway. "Exploration of what?"

"Oh, you know!" Arisu waved a hand airily. "Modern life."

Kagome assumed that because the film did, in fact, take place in modern times, that it could reasonably be called an exploration of modern life. She nodded as she gathered her purse and slipped her shoes on. "Thanks for the movie and the ice cream," she said.

"Thank you for visiting," Arisu replied. She walked Kagome to the door and embraced her.

Kagome hugged her back, a little awkwardly. "Take care of yourself," Arisu cautioned. "Call me if you need anything."

Kagome forced herself to smile. "Sure thing," she replied. She quickly turned away and headed down to her little '88 Honda and slid into the driver's seat with a sigh of relief. Home, she thought as she let out the clutch and coasted onto the street to drive the short distance to her flat.

When she arrived, she walked through the front door and tossed her keys on the end table before bending down to stroke the cat, who yowled softly.

"Hey Kirara," Kagome whispered. "Hungry?"

Kirara meowed. Kagome smiled what felt like her first genuine smile of the day and moved into the tiny kitchen. She grabbed a can of cat food from the cupboard and opened it, dumping the contents into the bowl that sat on her table. Following the time honored ritual, the cat leapt onto the tabletop and began to eat. Kagome was aware that most people would find a cat on the table to be strange and possibly unhygienic - but she figured that she had no one to impress but herself, so she did what she pleased. She found it funny that what she pleased rarely made her happy.

She plopped into a chair and absentmindedly scratched Kirara's ears as she looked out the window. There wasn't anything to see - her flat was directly against another building - but she found that looking out a window always helped her to think. Now that she was home, she could think about the day without anyone distracting her.

Slowly she let her head loll against her shoulders, working out the knots and kinks as she gazed through the glass at the brick wall. Placing a hand on her heart, she thought back to the mountain trail, and the strange, unsettling youki that had ambushed her.

Now that she was alone she could assess it. There hadn't been any threat to her and her friends - of that much she was certain - but the aura had been powerful, yet dulled by something. She couldn't tell what had blanketed it, though, or what kind of youkai it was. It was like listening to a voice from underwater; the cadences and tone were recognizable, but true appreciation was impossible. She couldn't tell much except that it was a static presence. She wanted to know more. If, that is, it hadn't all been in her imagination.

Rising from the table Kagome bit her lip and fiddled with her blouse, carefully unbuttoning and discarding it as she walked from the kitchen to the bedroom - a distance of about five feet - where she paused and peeled off her socks. It was dark in the room, but she didn't turn the

light on, instead opting to divest herself of her clothing in the gloom before moving into the bathroom to absently inspect her hip.

Wincing, she worked her shorts down over her pelvis and let them pool on the floor. Standing in a bra and panties in the unforgiving light of the bare bathroom bulb, she inspected the damage: sprawling across her skin was an enormous black bruise that would likely not heal for two weeks or more. Kagome gritted her teeth as she massaged her tender flesh and let her mind wander.

Youkai, she thought. Mentally, she palmed the idea. Unfortunately the word didn't seem to have any weight in her mind. Licking her lips, Kagome said it out loud.

"Youkai."

The word left her cold. The fingers working at her hip slowed in their motions.

There weren't any youkai in her time. They had been wiped out, or lost their power, or simply moved to the forgotten parts of the world. They shouldn't be on a mountain in the modern day, so close to Tokyo. They shouldn't be that powerful.

They were so real in the past - they weren't supposed to be here. People still believed in them, but in all her time in the modern age, she had never found one. In a way, their absence delineated her past life from her present one; a lack of the fantastic, the loss of the amazing defined her existence now. In the world of almost five hundred years ago, she was a mystical figure who fought demons and purified evil and befriended hanyous and kitsunes and monks and youkai taiji-ya, but in the here and now she was just Kagome, struggling medical student in a Tokyo flat with a car and an adorable, overweight cat.

There shouldn't be youkai here. That part of her life was gone. She should forget about it.

Looking at her tired face in the mirror, she pressed her lips together and swallowed her hope.

Resolutely, Kagome walked back to the kitchen and removed an ice pack from the freezer. Wrapping it in a dirty towel that she found under the sink, she padded back to her bedroom and laid down in the dark, not even bothering to take off her bra. She kicked the covers onto herself and pressed the ice pack between her injured hip and the mattress.

Within a minute she felt the heavy, comforting weight of Kirara hop onto the foot of the bed. She let her eyes fall closed, and slid into a fitful sleep.

* * *

"Go home, Higurashi-san."

"I'm fine, Sensei, I'm just tired!" Frustrated, Kagome looked up into the eyes of her academic advisor, and knew she had lost the battle.

"You are making an unforgivable number of mistakes, Higurashi. You need to go home and get some rest," Aitoshi-sensei said sternly, his wizened face wrinkling into a passable resemblance

of a prune. "You're grades are good enough, but if you keep making mistakes you are going to hurt yourself or someone else!"

Grimly, Kagome glanced down at the scalpel in her right hand and the cadaver beneath the other. She hated working with the dead, but considering how many times she'd nicked a major artery today she was glad it was a cadaver. If the body had been living when she started on it, it certainly wasn't now. All things considered, her patient had already died about five times.

Concentration shattered, Kagome looked up at the kindly, grandfatherly face of her instructor. "Forgive me, Aitoshi-sensei," she said, ashamed.

The old instructor patted her hand. "Do not trouble yourself further," he said. "Please take the rest of the week off. A doctor must always be alert and on their feet so that she can do her best."

"I know," Kagome replied. She'd heard the same little speech a million times, but somehow the words always seemed to slip her mind.

"Go home, Higurashi-san. Get some fresh air. Sleep in."

Nodding, Kagome left the small lab, glad that there were only three other students in lab today so her embarrassment was at a minimum. Peeling off her gloves and apron, she disposed of them before scrubbing down. Swinging her satchel onto her shoulder, Kagome left the room. She wanted to do nothing more than crawl into her car and sleep, but she knew that she wouldn't be able to do so.

She hadn't slept soundly in four nights. She'd awoken, tired and sore, on Sunday morning, and had spent a day in and out of the tub, soaking her body and trying to lift her spirits. It hadn't worked; no amount of raspberry bubble bath would soothe her nerves, and she spent the day jumpy and on edge. Every time the cat brushed against her she started, and from the corners of her eyes she thought she saw shadows lurking against the walls of her flat.

Sunday night she lay awake until the small hours, staring at the ceiling, and when Monday dawned the sky was grey and sinister, and she found herself waiting to feel the chill of youki against her heart. Unbalanced, unsettled, and unhappy, she trudged through the next few days, fending off her friends' comments, unable to sleep well, unable to eat, and barely staying alive on coffee and chocolate bars.

She was going to die at this rate, and all because of some stupid feeling that she was now almost positive she had imagined. The more she thought about it - and she thought about it all the time - the more convinced she was that she had made it up, or had mistaken one feeling for another. There weren't any youkai any longer. She was being stupid.

"Higurashi-san!"

Kagome turned tiredly, registering the voice as that of Yoshi Morhei, whom she dated once her senior year in college before they both entered medical school. They'd had a bad break up, but remained friends, even though sometimes she found herself missing him. She smiled at him

tiredly as he skidded to a halt in front of her. "I'm glad I caught you," he wheezed, bending over and propping himself on his knees. Kagome suspected he was going to ask her to go to another damn club this weekend. He loved clubs but never wanted to go with someone to whom he was attached, preferring instead to go with friends and go home with strangers. She was just not in the mood.

"Yoshi-kun," she began.

"No, no! No clubs!" he huffed quickly. "I was just wondering if you had time to study next Wednesday for the Pharm exam."

Kagome was feeling thoroughly sick of everyone. Just say no, she told herself. You don't need to study, and he should be studying on his own anyway.

She smiled at him. "Sure, no problem. What time and where?" Mentally, she kicked herself.

"Eight, at the library," he answered looking up at her happily, making her flutter and miss him, just a little bit more. "Thanks, I'll make it up to you."

"Yeah," Kagome said as he jogged away. She kept her head down the rest of the way to the cramped parking garage.

Dropping into the front seat of her car, Kagome threaded her fingers through the hair at her temples and let her head fall forward against the steering wheel. Her forehead met it with a dull thunk.

It took a second for the pain to set in. "Ow," she finally moaned. Leaning back, she opened the visor and looked at herself in the spotty mirror.

Dark circles ringed her eyes, and she could see the blue veins in her throat.

"You look like death warmed over," she told her reflection. "And now you're talking to a mirror. It's time to do something about this situation."

Her reflection nodded back. Kagome hurriedly flipped the visor back up and focused on her white knuckles gripping the wheel.

"But what to do?" she asked out loud, moving her car into gear. "You're going crazy, you think there's a youkai in the modern era, and you can't sleep." And oh, sleep sounded so good right now. There was a fog inside her brain. Her head was fuzzy, covered in cobwebs, difficult to engage.

She pulled into the street with painstaking care and made her way toward her flat, train of thought slowly chugging out of the station.

"You just imagined it," she mumbled out loud, carefully maneuvering the car around corners and avoiding other vehicles, driving through a dream. "Just imagined it, just imagined it."

Repeating it like a mantra, she parked her car and stumbled up the narrow stairs. "You just imagined it," she said to herself as she opened the door. "You just imagined it, it wasn't real, and even if it was..."

Kagome trailed off, standing just over the threshold. She tried again. "Even if it was..."

And that was it. Even if it was... what? You'll ignore it, go to school, let it slide? Kagome closed her eyes tightly, then opened them again, and looked at her existence.

Small, cramped apartment, small, cramped car, small, cramped friends, small, cramped life, and a demon on a mountainside.

Brushing her bangs out of her eyes, she made a sudden, giddy decision.

Without even closing the door, Kagome ran into the bathroom and dug her shorts out of the hamper. Divesting herself of her slacks, she pulled the shorts on and fastened them. Grabbing a rubber band, she pulled her hair into a ponytail, kicked off her shoes and pulled on her sneakers. Giving Kirara - Kirara! she thought somewhat hysterically, how sad is that? - a pat on the head, she jogged outside, closed and locked the door, and ran down the steps to her car.

"You just imagined it," she said as she slammed the car door. She suspected, as she jammed the keys into the ignition and started the car, that she hadn't had enough sleep, but curiously she didn't care.

"But if you didn't..." she told herself, and laughed.

* * *

The sun was hanging low in the sky as she pulled up outside the park and climbed out of her car. Ahead of her was the trail she and her friends had traveled last Saturday. It hadn't even been a week since she'd last seen it, but it looked strange in the dying light, like a place in a foreign country she'd never seen before.

Kagome wished that she had a bow with her; she'd always felt better with a quiver on her back and a smooth, wooden weapon in her hand. But she hadn't shot an arrow in years. Sighing, Kagome popped open the glove box and grabbed the Swiss army knife she kept there for emergencies. Slipping it into her pocket and grabbing a bottle of water and her emergency flashlight, she clambered out of the driver's seat and stood up. Taking a deep breath, Kagome set out up the mountain.

Night fell silently but slowly around her as she trudged up the path. It was more difficult going with her injured hip and fatigue, but she made good time, and before she knew it she was rounding a bend that she recognized and up ahead sat the rock she had fallen upon.

It sat innocuously by the trail, but a feeling of intense apprehension seized her, sending her heart into her throat, and she froze in her tracks. For a moment, she stared at the boulder, and tried to turn around.

"Stupid rock," she mumbled aloud, trying to discard the feeling.

In the back of her mind, she wondered what had happened to the girl who was never afraid of anything, who had taken on an evil monster and won, who had saved the world.

She set her jaw and continued forward.

The closer she got without a trace of youki, the easier her breath came. Kagome reached the boulder without incident.

She took a shuddering breath, not knowing if she was relieved or disappointed. "See?" she said aloud, her voice sounding small in the empty wilderness. "It was all in your head." Giving a nervous laugh, she propped herself against the rock in the fading light of the day. Beneath her, the stone was still warm from a day in the sun, and she let the residual heat seep into her skin and relax her a little. Smiling at the feeling, Kagome felt she deserved a good, leisurely five minutes before she went home to collapse on her bed. With luck, she mused as she took a sip of water, I won't wake up until next week.

She replaced the cap on her bottle and turned to go.

A cold, invisible hand plunged through her chest and squeezed her heart in fingers of ice.

Kagome cried out and went to one knee to the ground, gasping. The feel of youki was stronger than before, almost coming in waves, as if it was being consciously controlled, and she lifted her head and tried to focus on its direction.

She'd never been the best at detecting demonic aura - her area of specialty had always been the shards of the Shikon no Tama - but the more time she had spent in the Sengoku Jidai the more she had been able to detect it. Weak youkai were difficult, but a strong youkai was usually easy to pick out if they weren't behind a barrier or masking their youki in some way, and this one was strong. Scrambling to her feet, Kagome brushed the gravel from her knee and glanced around, frantically trying to get a feel for the location.

The growing shadows of the night were making it difficult for her to see, but she didn't really need her eyes. Glancing up the mountainside, she felt a pulse in the cold.

Up there, she thought. It still wasn't moving, and a small but insistent voice in her head was very quietly suggesting that it might, perhaps, be waiting for something. Against her better judgment, Kagome reached up and grabbed a tree root and began to climb up the steep incline.

It was slow going, and even discounting the times she stopped to rest and reassess her direction in the thickly forested landscape, it took her maybe twenty minutes of scraping against sharp branches and strange plants before she felt the pulse, very close, and looked to her left and saw the entrance of a cave only a few meters away. She felt her eyebrows rise up beneath her bangs.

"Huh," she said out loud, her pulse pumping in her neck. "That's unexpected."

The entrance was hidden by heavy growth, and would have been invisible from any other angle. Kagome let herself marvel nervously for a minute before realizing that she was spacing out again, and then carefully began to edge her way across. Beneath her hands, the damp earth moved, and Kagome found that there were plenty of rocks embedded in the ground for her to stand on, so it was easy to reach the rocks that ringed the entrance.

With a grunt, she pulled herself inside. The mouth of the cave was maybe one meter in diameter, so she pulled the flashlight out of her pocket and switched it on. On her hands and knees, she slowly advanced into the darkness.

In the silence, the only sound was her heavy breathing. Nerves and fatigue made her pant heavily as she crawled her way through the long tunnel. It felt to her that the youki was holding steady, though she was shivering with the chill of the cave and the vague fear and excitement of whatever lay in front of her. She stuck the flashlight in her mouth to light the way ahead, but there was only darkness beyond her small circle of illumination, until after only two minutes she nearly ran into something very unexpected.

There was a barrier.

Kagome sat back in shock. She hadn't touched it, but she could feel its presence across an opening into what appeared to be a wider cavern. She could sense, behind the barrier, a demonic presence, but to get to it she would have to go through the mystical wall.

Not so hard, she thought, trying to dispel her anxiety. It feels youki-based. Maybe if I touch it...

Putting a hand out, she tested it. To her surprise, her fingertips tingled where they touched, and it began to dissolve beneath her hands.

"Wow," she said out loud to dispel the strange feeling of purification that she hadn't experienced in years. "I can't believe that finally came in handy again." Unfortunately, she sounded rather ridiculous because she had forgotten to take the flashlight out of her mouth. Kagome was quietly grateful that no one was around to witness her being so foolish. Except, perhaps, the youkai who was now free to go wherever it wished.

The entire experience was becoming surreal, and once the barrier had dissipated the strangely muted youki hit her full force, making her shiver a little bit. It was no longer an unpleasant feeling, merely odd. Kagome felt a little strange, restless inside her skin, as she inched into the space beyond.

Removing the flashlight from her mouth, Kagome aimed the beam of light upwards. Here the ceiling seemed higher, so she stood up and slowly walked on.

Kagome gazed around her, wondering which direction the attack would come from. Without conscious thought she slipped her hand into her pocket and fingered the knife she had stored there. Her breath was coming in short pants, and down the side of her face she felt a slim trickle of sweat fall. Running her forearm across her forehead, Kagome nervously flashed the beam of light into the corners, looking and searching.

You won't have time to get the knife out, she thought. You'll never survive. Where is it, and what the hell is taking so long?

And then it caught her eye.

In a far corner of the cave was something too pale to be a rock, though Kagome couldn't make out any distinct features.

She took one step toward it, and the youki grew fractionally stronger.

She took another step. Again, it grew.

The lump wasn't moving.

Kagome bit her lip and forced herself to walk steadily toward it and reached out a hand.

It also had a hand, seemingly coming out of nothing, except if she squinted she suddenly saw.

What had only been a rock before became a knee, and the strange texture was a bowed head covered in hair, and the hand on the knee was connected to an arm that disappeared into a sleeve - and all of it was covered in a layer of dust. Growing in the folds of the clothing was dull green lichen.

Kagome didn't know whether to be disgusted or fascinated, so she settled for horrified. The youkai had been here for a long, long time, unmoving through the centuries since it last crawled inside the long tunnel of stone. She wondered why it was there, and who had sealed it.

One thing was certain, though - it only slumbered. It was still alive. The youki was enough to tell her that.

Fascinated, she reached out a hand to touch what she could barely make out as a sleeve, but without warning it crumbled a little beneath her questing fingers, and the thick dust flew up into a cloud. Kagome coughed and choked. She waved a hand and peered through the fog before deciding to leave the clothes alone. Hefting the flashlight to her shoulder, she reached up.

Her hands touched the curtain of hair. It seemed that it hadn't stopped growing since the youkai had been interned, and a heavy pile of it spilled onto what seemed to be the other leg. Slowly, Kagome lifted the heavy mass - it was stiff and difficult to manipulate - and saw the bowed face beneath.

Even in the dim light, there was something familiar about it, and her heart caught in her throat.

"No," she whispered. "Oh, no."

Pulling herself up to straddle its leg, Kagome jammed the flashlight between her teeth again and raked her fingers through the thick, grimy locks, pulling back the demon's head. Beneath her frantic hands the dust cleared from the still, marble face, stripes emerging from the blanket of grime, and on the smooth brow a half-moon shone. But she didn't need those things to tell her who this was.

Even dirty and grimy and in the darkness of a cave, she recognized the face of Sesshoumaru, still as a statue, cold as ice.

Still alive, but dreaming.

Kagome began to cry.

It was too much - the fatigue, the loneliness, the constant annoyance - and now the past, trickling down a mountainside, had turned into a flood.

The barrier had been based on youki. He had been sealed away by a youkai, sealed in a cave, for decades, maybe centuries, dirty and cold and deep in sleep.

It wasn't right that he should be like this.

Through a film of tears, Kagome withdrew her knife and clicked it into place. Then she grabbed a handful of hair and began to slice.

When she was done his face was once again visible, and she propped his head against the wall as the momentary madness that had possessed her passed. She tossed the grimy locks away and tried to assess the situation.

She was in a cave with a hibernating youkai that she had known, once-upon-a-time, and it was now dark outside and pretty soon she would have to go back if she didn't want her flashlight to lose power. If she had any sense at all, she would leave now and let Sesshoumaru wake up on his own. He would wake up eventually, yes? And she certainly didn't need to be around when he opened his eyes and saw the world again. She could be far away.

And yet she couldn't do that. Leaving someone behind was not something of which she was capable.

Kagome turned back and let her hands wander over his features. With care, she placed her palms on his cheeks, thumbs trailing over his eyelids, clearing away the detritus of centuries.

"I don't want to have to carry you out on my back," she told him, matter-of-fact. "You should wake up."

And then he did.

* * *

There once was a hanyou.

Fifteen and scared, she was pressed up against a boy she barely knew and in the process of being crushed to death by a giant centipede. She cried out. Golden eyes glared down at her with disdain.

"Hey," said the boy with long white hair and dog ears perched atop his head.

Through a haze of pain, Kagome looked up at him. In any situation other than this one, she would have been embarrassed by the proximity of her face to his crotch. Some distant part of her mind made a note of it, but kept wisely silent. She could be embarrassed later, if she got out of this alive.

Against her back, she felt the carapace of the centipede grate and move, and she ground her teeth together.

His lips were moving, but his voice was difficult to focus on through the crushing pressure. "Can you pull this arrow out?" she heard him say, voice dulled as if through a sheet of water.

"What?" she wheezed.

"Can you pull it out?" he snapped.

Grimly she focused on the shaft that poked out from the soft, fleshy part of his shoulder, seemingly pinning him to the tree. With great effort, she unclenched her hand from his red haori and unbent her arm, even though all she wanted to do was curl around the pain in her side, shut out the agony of the crushing weight. She reached up -

"No!" cried a voice from behind her. It sounded like the voice of the old miko who had greeted her - Kaede, her mind supplied superfluously - and fed her at her fireside. "That arrow is Inuyasha's seal!"

Doubt flooded down. What do I do? she wanted to cry. She couldn't find the breath, and in her eyes she could feel the heavy, pounding pulse of her heart.

"Hey!" the boy shouted. "If that thing absorbs the Shikon no Tama, we're all finished! You want to be centipede food?"

Then there were golden eyes, so angry and familiar, glaring down at her. "And what about you?" he demanded, white hair falling over his shoulders and brushing against his face. "You wanna die here, too?"

She was dying. Her bones were grinding against each other, life leaking from her side, pain consuming every cell of her being.

"Die?" she choked. Die here?

Vision blurring, the world spun itself into a tiny moment. Die, without Mama, or Souta, or Jii-chan? At fifteen? She was dying, dying, dying, in a strange time and place, all alone.

An angry face was blinking down at her, waiting.

She forced breath into her lungs. "Die here?" she ground out. Seemingly of its own accord, her left hand fisted itself in the thick fabric of his haori, and she felt the muscles in her arm bunch and move, pulling her up, up. Slowly, she slid up the boy's body, striving, reaching for the shaft in his chest.

"In this place... I don't even... know?"

Smooth wood brushed her fingertips.

One more try, she thought dimly. One more try. A sob gathered behind her clenched teeth.

One more heave, and she was there, hand firmly around the arrow.

"No!" she screamed, and pulled -

The arrow vanished, and from the boy came a pulse of cold.

* * *

As though they were moving through water, clawed hands on her shoulders bore her to the ground, and then there were golden eyes, so angry and familiar, glaring down at her in the dim light of the fallen flashlight. Kagome tried not to choke from the dust he shed, and her eyes watered with the effort.

Sesshoumaru, dirty and grimy and strong, straddled her, knees trapping her hips against his, sharp claws digging into her flesh. She felt his heavy weight bearing her down into the cold stone floor, and struggled to breathe. There was a rhythmic pressure in her throat, and it took a second for her to realize that it was her pulse, hammering out of control.

She watched, fearful, as he bent his head to her neck, and inhaled.

It was silent in the cave, except for the sound of her panting. Then he spoke.

"Miko," he murmured into the crook of her throat, voice hoarse, a shadow of the one she remembered, "you died."

Her hands were flat against his chest - no armor, her mind noted, distantly - pushing against him ineffectually, but at his declaration she paused.

"What?" was all she could think of to say.

The demon was sagging into her. "Didn't you die?" he murmured again, voice tired. She could feel his lips and breath stirring her hair.

Tired and confused, she told the truth. "No," she answered.

There was a long pause. "Ah," he sighed, and then the pressure was gone and she was free as he rolled away from her to lie on his back.

Kagome waited for him to elaborate, but instead he was silent. After a moment she sat up and looked at him.

He lay on his back and gazed at his own dusty hair, strung between his claws. Kagome saw that it was much longer than his bangs had been, though she couldn't have reached it to cut it

because he had been against the wall. She tried not to breathe for a full minute, just watching him as he let his hair fall through his claws, until he appeared to reach a decision.

Painstakingly, Sesshoumaru pulled himself into a sitting position, and then rose to his knees. Swaying, he ran his hands through his hair, sweeping it over his shoulder. Kagome watched in fascination as he gathered the mass in his hands.

His fingers blurred, and then the heavy locks were falling away.

Sesshoumaru turned and looked at her, but he seemed awkward. His clothing was stiff, his hair was a mess, and he moved with a heaviness she had never witnessed in either him or his brother.

She was about to ask if he was all right - a ridiculous impulse, it seemed - when abruptly he rose to his feet, turned his heels, walked to the opening that led to the outside, and bent at the waist and exited.

Kagome was left staring at the hole in the wall and wondering how anyone could ever be so rude.

"Hey!" she cried. Twisting where she sat, she made a grab for her flashlight, but it skittered away from her grasp. Sighing angrily, she got to her feet, scraping her leg against the floor of the cave in the process, grabbed the flashlight, and ran to the exit. Already, the demon was out of sight, and suddenly Kagome was questioning the wisdom of unsealing the cave. Whoever had sealed him obviously hadn't wanted him to be disturbed, but now that she had awoken him visions of Sesshoumaru rampaging through downtown Tokyo in full demon form were insistently drawing attention to themselves in the darker corners of her mind.

"Wait!" she called down the corridor.

Clearly, he wasn't going to.

Panicking, Kagome dropped to her hands and knees again, shoving the flashlight into her mouth, and beat a hasty exit, the stinging of her knees against the rough rock making her eyes water.

"I'll purify that bastard if I have to," she said out loud. "I will, I will, I will- " She was uncertain as to who she was trying to convince, but it certainly wasn't herself, because she was positive she wouldn't be able to do such a thing. The past hurt too much for her to erase it that way.

After a brief eternity in the tunnel, she finally burst into the fresh air and almost killed herself with a tumble down the mountainside. At the last second, her fingers grazed a root sticking out beside the cave entrance and she stopped her fall before it became terminal. Unfortunately, her flashlight jerked from her mouth and rolled and bounced, end over end, into the trees below.

"Damn!" she blurted out loud. "Damn, damn, damn!"

Sesshoumaru was nowhere in sight.

Cursing, Kagome swung herself over until she thought she was at the place where she had climbed up. From between the branches above her a full moon shone, and she used its silvery light to glance down into the foliage. Slowly, she lowered a foot onto a heavy root, and carefully lowered herself down the incline.

Half an hour later, scratched and bruised, she landed at the trail that she left a million years ago, and found the demon crouched atop the very boulder that had assaulted her. He was braced on his hands, feet beneath his body with one knee drawn up to his chest, like a marathon runner about to take off. Tenseiga gleamed at his hip. In the moonlight he seemed to glow.

"Miko," he rasped, presumably by way of greeting.

"Youkai," she replied snidely.

He shifted slightly, and Kagome found her gaze moving to his arms. They were curiously bare, muscles quivering beneath his luminous skin, as though he was about to leap from his perch. She realized that the fabric, centuries old, was crumbling before her very eyes. Almost embarrassed, she looked down at the path and moved a pebble around with her toes.

"Why did you wait for me?" she asked.

Sesshoumaru ignored her. "What time is this?" he demanded. She could hear him sniffing the air, as though he were trying to identify a scent that was altogether new to him.

Kagome wondered what he would do with the truth. "Over four hundred years since we last saw each other," she replied. She looked at him out of the corner of her eye, gauging his reaction.

To her surprise, he only nodded, accepting this fact. "Good," he said, and slowly toppled off the rock.

"Oh!" Kagome cried, rushing forward, hands outstretched. She stopped before she touched him. "Are you all right?" she asked anxiously, hovering over his fallen form.

The youkai, curled on his side, only gave her an appraising, sidelong look. He apparently didn't deem it necessary to answer her, and Kagome bit her lip as she looked at him. He was so dirty, it just didn't seem right, and his ancient clothes were disintegrating into dust. His sleeves were tatters, and his hakama hung in rags to his knees. The shoes he had been wearing were gone as well.

He was a total mess. He needed somewhere to rest, food to eat, new clothes, and it was beginning to dawn on Kagome that the only person he knew in the modern era was her.

Haha, she thought. The very thought. It is to laugh!

But her vocal cords disagreed. Seemingly of its own accord her mouth opened, clearly not about to take any guff from her brain about uppity demon princes who didn't care for humans.

"I have a home. Not far from here." The words came out, falling flat in the night air.

Sesshoumaru said nothing.

Kagome suppressed a frustrated sigh. "Can you move?" she asked him.

Golden eyes slid away from her. Painstakingly, he tucked his feet beneath him. She watched as he steadied himself with his hands and then slowly rose, occasionally pausing as if the act caused him discomfort. When he was finally standing, tattered clothes and all, his eyes found hers.

So similar, she thought. In her chest, her heart hitched painfully. Quickly, she turned away. If he wanted to stay on the mountain, he could. If he wanted to follow her... well, she probably couldn't stop him, even if she wanted to.

Resolutely, Kagome set off down the mountain trial, and she didn't look back to see if he followed.

* * *

Sesshoumaru, shedding dust and pieces of clothing all over the ugly burgundy interior of her car, kept his face turned away from her. The glances she snuck from the driver's seat gave her a magnificent view of the line of muscle in his neck and the shape of his jaw, but what concerned her most was his hair. The very sight of it reminded her so sharply of Inuyasha that she bit her lip so hard she drew blood. The long strands spilled over the car seat, catching against the fabric, and if she blurred her eyes just a little bit, she could imagine that the man who sat next to her had little ears perched atop his head.

A stab of longing lanced through her chest, and Kagome turned her eyes back to the road.

She was having severe difficulties wrapping her mind around the situation, but she felt that she was beginning to understand. Sesshoumaru had been sealed by another demon into the side of a mountain for several centuries. He was exhausted, weakened, out of sorts, and he remembered her. And now he was in her little Honda, gazing out the window at the passing lights that signaled other vehicles and towering buildings. She wondered what he made of them, and if he found any fear of the present world in his heart.

She wished his clothes would stop disintegrating, but there seemed to be little she could do about that.

Of course, she had never really questioned Inuyasha's presence in the modern world whenever he came through the well, but Inuyasha had been her friend. He had seemed to fit in where she wanted him to fit, although her very longing for him probably had something to do with it.

Sesshoumaru didn't fit, perhaps because she didn't expect him to do so.

Either way, the silence was oppressive and awkward inside the car, and Kagome suspected that any attempt at breaking it open would be met with a glare. Sesshoumaru had never been

the sort of person to whom one could talk openly, regardless of whether or not he was currently trying to kill one.

Kagome shifted uncomfortably and tried not to think about the situation she had thrown herself into - like the old her would have done, she realized with a small start - until she pulled into her parking spot, opened her door, and clambered out. Walking around to the other side of the car, she pulled the door open and found Sesshoumaru fast asleep.

"Didn't you have enough sleep in that cave?" she muttered under her breath.

He opened his eyes and pinned her with a calculating look.

Taken aback and mildly embarrassed, Kagome took a quick step back. "Er, sorry," she said, putting out a placating hand. "I... thought you were asleep again."

Silently, the youkai lord unfolded himself from his seat and stood in the light of the street lamps, pale skin, pale hair, pale, tattered clothes.

He looked positively alien.

Kagome whirled around and stalked away, refusing to speak to him, determined that a night of sleep would set her right. Distantly, she wondered what had possessed her to actually believe that taking him home with her would be a good idea, especially when she desperately needed sleep herself. She doubted he needed any rest, but he could sit and stare at the wall of her sitting room if he wanted. Fumbling with her keys, Kagome opened her flat and ran inside to flip the lights on, leaving the door open behind her.

He entered only a few seconds later, silent and imperious, and shut the door behind him.

"A bath," he rasped. It was the first thing he'd said since the mountainside.

Kagome wondered if he knew how rude he sounded. "Sure, just a second," she said tightly. "Have a seat wherever you want."

He remained standing, staring at her. Those strange, familiar golden eyes were making her squirm unhappily, and Kagome turned around and ran to the bathroom to escape the sudden, uncomfortable curl in her stomach. Suddenly feeling like a stranger in her own home, Kagome shut the bathroom door and turned on the water in the tub.

As she waited for it to fill, she grabbed her only extra towel and laid it out on the sink. She had no idea what he was going to use for clothing once he was done, but she snatched the small trash can from beneath the sink and pulled it out for his crumbling garments. Seeing nothing else to be taken care of, she turned and exited the bathroom.

Sesshoumaru had chosen to sit with his back against the couch, right arm propped against his bent knee, just the way he had been in the cave. Kagome cleared her throat.

He didn't turn to look at her, but raised his head slightly, listening.

"Um..." she said, her words dying on her tongue. She cleared her throat and tried again. "It's almost ready. There's soap, and... shampoo. For your hair."

Sesshoumaru rose and pivoted in place. Without a word, he padded toward her. Stunned, Kagome barely had time to get out of the way before he brushed past her, what was left of his clothes catching against hers and seeming to pull her along with him. She almost followed him before she caught herself and planted a foot firmly against the floor. Oblivious to her, he walked into the bathroom and shut the door.

Sourly, Kagome hoped he would figure out the knobs and faucet soon enough before he flooded the apartment.

"Jerk," she whispered under her breath.

* * *

Two hours later, Kagome had unearthed a thin cotton yukata from the back of her closet that her mother had insisted she keep in case of unexpected guests, and Sesshoumaru was still in the bathroom. Absently, she wondered if he had drowned, and then immediately felt bad for thinking of him so callously. In the intervening time, she had switched her tiny television off and on at least fifty times, and had pretended to read twenty pages of a book, though she had absorbed none of it. She just wanted to sleep, but the bathroom was connected to her bedroom, and she felt distinctly uncomfortable just knowing that the youkai was in her house, let alone in her private sanctuaries.

She was all out of sorts, as if she had unzipped her skin and stripped it off at some point, but when she stepped into it again it didn't fit. Absentmindedly, Kagome rubbed her arms and decided to get her guest situated.

Cautiously, she stepped up to the bathroom door and tentatively knocked.

Through the wood, she heard him rasp, "Enter."

Twisting the knob she stepped inside, only to see Sesshoumaru still in the tub, completely nude, with his silver hair spread out across the porcelain, soft and shining once again.

Kagome was mortified. Granted, the water was cloudy with the grim sloughed from his skin and as medical student Kagome had seen hundreds of naked people, but it was the principle of the thing. Without a sound, she turned her back on him.

"I brought clothes," she informed him, staring into the darkness of her bedroom. "It's not great, but it should be good enough."

Behind her, she heard the sucking splash of a body removing itself from water. Dropping the yukata on the sink, Kagome beat a hasty retreat to the sitting room, where she sat and waited for him to emerge bright and shiny new.

Half an hour later she was still waiting, and the thoughts in her head were taking strange, loopy turns from the norm. She suspected that she was too tired to really think straight when she found herself wondering which of the little porcelain figurines that she had carefully lined up on the windowsill would taste the best, and, impatiently, longing to be in bed, she rose from the couch and marched into the bathroom.

"What's taking so long?" she demanded, opening the door.

Sesshoumaru sat, fully dressed in the yukata, on the bathroom floor, staring listlessly at the ceiling with his still sopping hair in the tub. He looked exhausted, arms crossed at the wrist and resting on his bent knees. The sodden towel was hanging over the edge of the sink.

Kagome bit her lip.

"Do you need help?" she asked.

Sesshoumaru didn't move or speak, but she thought she saw his eyelids flutter.

Grabbing a wide-toothed comb and her own dry towel from the small rack, Kagome stepped into the tub, noticing that he watched her bare legs swing by him as she did so. Knowing that he was looking at her body made her feel strangely warm and uncomfortable.

Stop it, she scolded. He's been asleep for hundreds of years and hasn't seen a woman since he entered that cave. The thought of Sesshoumaru even touching a female was strange, so Kagome shoved it away and tried to think professional thoughts.

Gently, as though she were caring for a patient, she towel-dried the silvery locks before carefully running the comb through them, from the scalp to the tips.

The demon seemed unconcerned by her proximity, though he swallowed whenever she accidentally touched the pointed tips of his elven ears with her fingers.

"Sorry," she muttered as he again seemed to shift uncomfortably under her touch.

His hair was drying quickly, and in half an hour it was heavy and silky again. Kagome gathered it into her lap so that it wouldn't touch the still-damp porcelain of the tub.

"Tired?" she asked him, carefully tossing the heavy hair over his shoulder.

He surprised her by answering. "A little," he replied, though he sounded as though he were coming from far, far away.

Kagome stood, wobbling a little beneath the heavy mantle of exhaustion, and stepped out of the tub. She noted with irritation that while the demon's hair might be dry, it had left wet trails over her khaki shorts and all down her legs, and her grand total of two towels were soaking wet. Gesturing for him to follow her, she stomped out of the bathroom and into the sitting room again and pointed to the couch. He stood in the doorway of her bedroom, looking ridiculous in his white yukata and tired face.

Kagome ignored his appearance. "That's pretty comfortable," she told him. "And there's a blanket on the back, just in case you get cold."

He padded into the sitting room, nodding. "I see," he said quietly.

"I'm..." She bit her lip again. "I'm going to sleep as well. Um. In there - " she waved at the bedroom door. "Um... I'll see you in the morning, I guess."

He said nothing, and Kagome felt a tendril of tension wrap around her spine. She suddenly realized that she didn't know if she trusted him.

Irritation lanced through her. It's probably too late to think of that now, she mentally scolded, and reaching out she flicked off the light.

Darkness fell on the room. Through the small window, the moon glimmered dimly, casting everything in a sad, sullen light, muting everything to blues and greys and blacks.

Her breath caught as the figure in the middle of the room shifted; soft silver hair gleamed, and flat yellow eyes regarded her.

She knew the man who was standing in her living room, but in the dark he became someone else.

* * *

There once was a dead miko.

Beneath the water, caught in the stinging arms of the waves, Kagome looked at the face of the woman who was her, but wasn't.

Kikyou's eyes were closed, and she looked so sad and dark in the water, surrounded by painful miasma, so like herself, that Kagome felt a curious tickling in her stomach. It was an almost hurtful empathy, piercing through her entrails, slicing through her bowels to rest in her heart. Beneath her fingers, the older woman was hard and cold, and blackness leaked from a horrifying crack down her shoulder.

I have to heal her, Kagome thought. I can't leave her here.

And she couldn't. But there was something underneath those thoughts, a thin current of consciousness that unsettled her. Why...?

Pushing away other thoughts, her hands moved of their own accord, worming their way into the other woman's haori. Kagome suppressed a blush as she brushed across the upper swell of Kikyou's breasts before she was able to press her fingers to the horrible wound.

Save her, she thought sadly. Her fingertips grew warm as from somewhere deep within her, her soul swelled and poured out, into the dark chasm of Kikyou's chest, coupled with the purified burial soil, and time stretched out.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Beneath the endless undulating waves, Kagome stared into the face of her former life, of her old life. Dark lashes brushed lovely, high cheeks, and her long, straight, beautiful hair spread around her like a black star. Her lips were ever so slightly parted, shining pink even beneath the murky waves of the pool, and Kagome could see the gleam of pearl-white dew-drop teeth just beneath those lips. She was beautiful, even recreated, even dead in the water, even with a fraction of a soul. Even in the gloom, sadness and loss lived in the lines of her face.

Looking at her, Kagome wondered if this was what she would look like when she was dead, and her fingers itched to pull the other miko close and hold her. Irrationally, Kagome wanted to cry, to pour out her own happiness, to bring her old self, her other self, a measure of peace. It hurt to see her like this, because it wasn't just Kikyou suspended in the water, suspended in time - it was also herself.

Before her eyes, the miasma swirled and darted away, as though it were alive and pained by her presence.

And then beneath her pain and sadness, Kagome split into two, and the surface Kagome kept thinking about sadness and loss, wanting to comfort and heal the woman in her arms, but the Kagome underneath was wondering just what it was that made them different.

The Kagome that whispered beneath the other thoughts asked why Inuyasha couldn't forget this one. The Kagome underneath wondered why neither of them seemed to be enough. Buried deep, she wanted to know what Kikyou had that she didn't, and vice versa, because they were the same person, but not.

Above her, sunlight poured down.

And then she was closing her eyes, so tired and confused, while gentle hands drew her up and up and into the air and light.

When she awoke, she was on the grassy bank, and Kikyou was nearby, looking at her with her usual solemn face.

"Why did you save me?" the miko asked, and Kagome felt herself tumbling into a trap.

"Because... there wasn't a choice, was there?" she said. It was the wrong answer.

And right then, she knew that she would never understand Kikyou, and Kikyou would never know her. They may have the same hair and eyes and face, the same body, the same soul, the same life and love, but they could never be reconciled. The time when they were one was gone, and could never be regained.

She tried to explain, tried to make Kikyou see, but between them she could feel the earth open up, into a chasm that could never be crossed, and all around the emptiness echoed.

In the dark, chaotic spaces of time and memory and lives half-lived, the one named Kikyou disappeared, and the one named Kagome was left alone.

* * *

The next day, Kagome woke up and remembered that she didn't have to go to school today, by order of her advisor, and a sudden warm feeling of well-being spiraled through her limbs as she stretched languorously beneath the sheets.

"Unnnnnnh," she groaned happily. Today, she would relax, because she hadn't been sleeping well, and she was still feeling gloriously sleepy. Yes. She would get up and read the paper, maybe watch a bit of tv, feed the cat, and maybe take a bath -

Memory crashed into her full force like a train, and Kagome choked on her own breath. She sat up, coughing violently, wondering if the demon, whose youki had already faded into her own background awareness, was awake or not, and if he was, what he was doing in her tiny flat to keep himself occupied.

Rolling to the side, she noticed that she had slept in her clothes that were now scratchy from air-drying after the incident in the bathroom. Pulling them off, she ran into the bathroom and scrubbed her face vigorously, hoping to make herself presentable. As she pulled on fresh clothes, she realized that Kirara wasn't in the bedroom with her.

Somewhat giddily, Kagome hoped that Sesshoumaru didn't have the same sort of relationship with cats that his brother had. She suspected that Buyou had never fully recovered from the psychological damage inflicted by Inuyasha.

She paused as she buttoned up her blouse and frowned, mentally mulling that idea, and then bit her lip. Though if I ever gave anything more than two stupid seconds' thought, she berated herself, forcing her fingers to move faster in their fastening, I might realize that Inuyasha's attitude toward cats was just fine and dandy compared to anything his brother might do.

Then again, if I ever gave anything more than two stupid seconds' thought, I wouldn't have brought him home in the first place. Ah, well, it was too late for that now. Brushing her hair out frantically, Kagome finally deemed herself decently clad. She ripped open the bedroom door and tumbled into the living room.

Sesshoumaru was propped against the side of the sofa, in profile. Next to him a book lay open, turned to somewhere in the middle, and in his lap Kirara purred like a diesel truck as he ran his clawed fingertips through her thick fur.

Kagome felt vaguely betrayed.

"Um," she said.

The demon looked up.

At a loss, Kagome felt her brain kick into automatic. "Do you want breakfast?" she asked brightly.

Sesshoumaru seemed confused. "Breakfast?" he asked slowly. His voice was better today, but it was still rough and dark and soft from centuries of disuse.

She felt her mouth thin into a flat line. "Food," she told him. "And sorry my cat is bothering you."

Glancing down at the cat in his lap, Sesshoumaru gave her the distinct impression that he had executed an elaborate shrug without actually doing so. "She is not," he informed her, "and no."

Kagome walked the short distance to the kitchen. "Are you sure?" she asked, looking over the half-wall that separated the kitchen from the living room. "Aren't you hungry?"

The demon leveled a cool gaze at her. "No," he said.

Kagome turned away from him, hoping she successfully hid the frown that passed across her features. He made her jumpy, and she wasn't certain she could deal with that this early in the morning. Reaching up, she retrieved a loaf of bread from the cupboard and, studiously ignoring Sesshoumaru, she popped a few slices in the toaster before busying herself with little cleaning tasks. She cleaned out the sink, put away a few dishes, and wiped off the tiny counter top as she waited for the quiet to become less oppressive.

He was watching her. Or reading the book. She couldn't tell and she wasn't about to look at him directly, but the very idea that his eyes might possibly be on her at that very moment was unsettling to her, made her feel like a visiting traveler in her own head.

The entire situation was surreal and upsetting, and Kagome surreptitiously pinched herself, just to make sure she wasn't hallucinating. Though, she thought, she could be hallucinating that she was pinching herself, but that just opened up a whole can of worms that she didn't really want to think about because it would give her a headache. The fact remained that Sesshoumaru was in her living room, stroking her cat, and reading her copy of Gray's Anatomy.

She pinched herself again as the toaster popped up.

Kagome popped up as well, gasping at the unexpected sound and nearly falling over.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him turn his head to look in her direction. She shot him a glare, simply because she was disconcerted, but he remained poker-faced as always. Huffing, Kagome turned and buttered her toast, pointedly ignoring him.

She let the knife smooth the creamy butter over the toast, and watched as it began to melt into the crevices of the bread. Nothing untoward happened as she did so; she felt the muscles clenched at the small of her back relax fractionally. It appeared that neither she nor her overweight, useless, treacherous cat were in danger, so there didn't seem to be any point in keeping her shoulders hunched and her jaw clenched. Forcing her body to unwind, Kagome munched on her toast, popped open a can of cat food, and turned around to find Sesshoumaru leaning against the opposite wall, cat in hand, and staring at her.

"Gah!" she cried, nearly losing her footing again.

Sesshoumaru merely blinked slowly.

"Don't do that," she snapped, on edge again.

Silently, he held out the cat, who yowled happily. Kagome twisted her lips and grabbed Kirara from his grasp, clenching her teeth as her fingers lightly brushed his, and turned away to the table.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

She heard his clothes slide against the wall as he moved away.

Kagome plopped the cat down on the table in front of her food and followed Sesshoumaru back into the living room, where she found him seated as regally as possible on the sofa. Settling down on floor against the half-wall, she wondered what she was going to say to him now that she was awake and the surreal night was suddenly transplanted by the evident reality of this morning. Her mouth opened; clearly, she was about to find out.

"Why are you still here?" she asked him, then mentally winced at the baldness of the question.

Sesshoumaru, however, did not seem to care. He looked away from her, over the half-wall and out the small window in the kitchen that backed up to the neighboring building, and didn't answer.

I wonder what's so fascinating about those bricks that compels people to look at them, she thought absently. Making the best of an awkward situation, Kagome took the opportunity to examine his face.

This morning he didn't look as tired as he had when she had turned off the light, and she wondered if he'd grabbed any sleep last night. The notion crossed her mind that he may have not actually been sleeping when she found him, and absentmindedly she questioned whether or not the strange state of hibernation in which she had discovered him had been at all restful.

Her eyes narrowed, studying him as he gazed into somewhere far away. There were shadows in his eyes, in a way that there hadn't been before. She remembered him from long ago, cold and hard, but sitting in her living room he seemed to be less arrogant. Well, you did find him under a layer of dust an inch thick, she reminded herself. That sort of thing is bound to kick anyone off their high horse.

She sighed, and decided to attack from a different angle.

"Did you sleep well?" she questioned.

Slowly, Sesshoumaru shifted his eyes from the window to her, and Kagome swallowed hard at the strange, painful hitching in her chest.

He just looked so inexpressibly... something. And he was so him, still, still the demon she remembered, except different. Like a ghost come to haunt her, he stared her down.

"Yes," he said finally.

Kagome let out a breath that she hadn't even known she was holding. "Oh, good," she said. "I know that couch can be a little lumpy at times. I'm glad you slept well. Um... yeah." She beamed at him, and he looked back.

Hmm, that line of questioning was not as fruitful as I thought it would be. She licked her lips. "Um, do you need anything?" she asked.

"A kimono," he answered promptly, as though he had been waiting for her to ask the question so they could get on with it. "White, preferably."

Progress! But... Thinking of the state of her bank account, Kagome bit her lip. "Um, you don't require it to be silk or anything, do you?"

Silently, he shook his head.

Placing a hand on her forehead, Kagome swept her bangs out of the way. "Okay, I think I can swing that. Anything else?"

Sesshoumaru appeared to think, although since he did not look away while he did it he appeared to be studying her mouth. Kagome barely refrained from squirming beneath his gaze.

"Books," he finally said. "History, and about this time."

Kagome nodded. "All right, I can do that."

They held each other's eyes for a moment before Kagome looked away, down at her hands where they rested limply in her lap.

"Er..." she said, "are you planning to stay here?"

"Did you not offer your home to me?" he retorted, folding his arms. It was the longest string of words he had uttered since she had set him free. Heart sinking, she realized that yes, she really had. Once again, her lack of foresight had managed to get her into a bit of a bind.

"Just asking," she said quickly. "I didn't know what you wanted to do."

"Do?"

She twisted her fingers around themselves. "Like... I didn't know if you wanted to go kill the guy who sealed you up, or what. Because, um..." she paused, and then decided that now was as good a time as any to break the bad news, "there aren't any youkai in this era." She glanced up.

Sesshoumaru looked amused, but all he said was, "Ah," as if he had been expecting the explanation.

Kagome frowned. "You aren't surprised?"

Sesshoumaru merely shrugged. "Books, miko," he instructed. "I need books."

She nodded. "All right, I'll see what I can do."

The demon in her living room held her eyes for a moment longer than necessary before looking away again. Kagome decided that she was on the brink of throwing something at him.

"You know, you haven't even said thank you," she announced.

"What for?" he asked the wall.

"For freeing you," she told him. You big dummy, she added mentally.

"Oh," he said, and shrugged. "Thank you, I suppose."

"You suppose?" Kagome asked. "Well, you're welcome, I suppose. I guess I should have left you there to rot." She stood, feeling put out. "Would have made whoever sealed you happy, I bet, not that they're probably alive or anything."

A short, sharp laugh broke from him. "He wouldn't care either way," he told her.

"Why not?" she asked, puzzled, pouncing on the opening. "Who sealed you?"

Once again, he caught her in his stare, the shadows in him reaching across the room to draw her in. "I did," he said softly.

"Oh," she replied. "Why?"

He refused to answer.

And that seemed to be all there was to that.

* * *

Kagome watched as Sesshoumaru's beautiful, impassive face looked down at the book in his hands, which, incidentally, was about the history of Japan from the Tokugawa period to the present. She'd picked up a number of books from the local library, most of them on history or warfare, but also a few on Japanese myths so that he could see to what state his race had been relegated. He had thumbed through one of the volumes of legends, but apparently it hadn't engaged him. He seemed unconcerned that there were no more youkai. Perhaps he thought it would just be easier to take over the world without any pesky lesser youkai in his way, or perhaps he didn't believe her. Either way, myths and legends clearly didn't interest him, but he was devouring the history books.

Propped against the half-wall that separated the kitchen from the living room, Kagome nibbled on a bit of cold rice and watched him catch up with the world.

It was interesting to watch Sesshoumaru read - not so much because he was particularly interesting to look at, but because it wasn't really an activity that she associated with him. Yesterday at this time, she would never have considered that he even knew which end of a

book went up, but now that she thought about it, it was only natural that he should know. He was clearly from the upper crust of society, educated and arrogant. It was only natural that he knew how to read.

It just didn't look very natural.

He held the books with great delicacy, propping them open in one hand with the other hand lying in his lap. When he turned the pages, he was deft but careful to not shred them with his claws, and he looked like he had a fair amount of practice doing so.

She wondered who had taught him how to decipher the squiggly markings, and wondered what he first read when he was younger. Almost out of nowhere, a vision came to her of Sesshoumaru, just a boy, reading a story aloud to his little brother who curled into the fluffy pelt that he no longer had.

Kagome tried to suppress the giggle that issued forth from that vision, but failed miserably.

Sesshoumaru glanced up at the snorting sounds she made, looking slightly confused at being jerked unceremoniously from the world in his head.

Immediately sobering, she covered her mouth. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was just thinking of something funny."

The expression on his face didn't change, but he also didn't pick up the book again either, prompting Kagome to squirm a little and try to break the silence.

"Um," she mumbled. "What happened to the pelt you used to carry around?"

Slowly Sesshoumaru lifted his left hand to his right shoulder, where the pelt had once sat, and she realized, suddenly, bizarrely, that his arm had grown back. She wondered why she hadn't noticed it before.

"I did not bring it with me," he said simply. He followed her gaze to his hand, pale and streaked with magenta stripes.

Biting her lip, she looked away. "I'm glad you have your arm back," she said quietly, staring at a tiny stain on her carpet. She picked at it with her finger for a while, hoping he would just turn away and forget about her. Maybe if she was very quiet he would ignore her and go back to studying, or maybe she should just throw a blanket over her head and be done with it. She couldn't take much more of this awkward silence or stunted conversation.

After a while she glanced up to find him still staring at her.

Kagome sucked in her breath.

"Hm," he said, voice noncommittal, and turned back to the book in his hands, blinking.

She rose and left the room.

* * *

Two days later, the day before her exams were set to begin, Kagome presented Sesshoumaru with a few fairly cheap white cotton-poly blend kimonos and a pair of royal blue hakama that she had been able to pick up, and he wrinkled his nose ever so slightly in distaste. She recognized the look on his face because he had aimed at her many times in the past, though this was the first time in the present that he had worn the expression. Kagome thought it was a little strange to see it again, but her indignation overrode any curiosity over his reactions.

"Well, if you don't like them, you can walk around naked," she announced, tossing them over the arm of the sofa. "It's not like I can really afford them anyway." Having grown used to his silence, she didn't wait for him to answer, merely spun on her heel and marched into the kitchen, where she stored away the milk she'd also bought on her excursion. Sesshoumaru had yet to eat anything that she could see, so she had bought enough only for herself. In a moment of more ridiculous speculation, she assumed that he got his sustenance from the air through some demonic form of osmosis; it was either that or he was going out at night while she slept and devouring stray cats.

She pressed her lips together, wondering why this had to be so difficult, and finally deciding that she should just forget about it and make something to eat. After a few moments of studying the meager contents of her cupboards she settled on onigiri and began to drag her ingredients down from their sparse shelves.

Wishing she had enough money for meat, Kagome sighed heavily and began to ladle rice into the rice steamer before adding the water and setting the timer. As the steamer began to heat up, she fetched a bowl from the top shelf, added a dash of salt, then filled it with cool water and set it on the counter. Next she opened the refrigerator and rummaged around until she found a package of umeboshi in the back. They didn't look terribly appetizing, and she normally wouldn't touch the little pickled plums with a ten foot pole, but she was getting sick of plain rice. Sighing, she grabbed the package and set it beside the bowl of water. It would have to do, she supposed. Checking to make certain that the rice was cooking, Kagome turned around.

Sesshoumaru was sitting in his new clothes, white and beautiful against her ugly sofa, reading a book on 20th century warfare and petting her cat.

In her mind, Kagome went back over the events of the past few minutes, but couldn't for the life of her figure out how Sesshoumaru had divested himself of the yukata and into the new clothes that he so obviously disliked without drawing attention to himself.

"How did you get dressed so quickly?" she demanded, striding over to him. "I thought you didn't like what I brought you!"

Glancing up, he seemed genuinely confused. "I did not wish to walk around nude," he informed her.

"That doesn't answer my question!" she cried.

Sesshoumaru merely shrugged.

"Oh, forget it," she muttered, turning around and stomping into her room, determined to ignore the enigma.

She still had time before the rice was ready, and her exams were coming up fast. Placing her hands firmly on her hips, she surveyed the pile of medical texts piled in the corner of her room and tried to decide which one she needed to study the most.

All of them, she thought morosely. Sighing, she picked up her pharm textbook and several others and walked back into the living room.

"Do you mind if I sit on the couch?" she asked the still demon. "I need to do some studying."

"Studying?" Sesshoumaru wanted to know.

She smiled a little bit, because his voice seemed to echo Inuyasha's in that moment. "Yes," she replied. "I'm studying to be a doctor."

Giving her a calculating look, the demon closed the book he was reading on one elegant finger. "You are going to be a healer?" he asked her.

"Er, yes," she replied, surprised that he had asked her a question. "I am."

"Why?"

Kagome frowned. She had never really given the question much thought. It had merely seemed natural that she do something like become a doctor. "I guess... I just wanted to help people," she told him.

On his lips a faint smirk appeared. "Still a miko after all these years," he said quietly, holding her with his amber gaze.

After a moment nothing else seemed forthcoming, and Kagome shifted, acutely aware that she looked disheveled and tired. "So may I sit on the sofa?" she asked him finally.

"It is your house," he replied. "You may of course do what you wish."

"Thanks," she said. I think.

She walked around him and sat on the end of the couch furthest from him, not entirely comfortable in such close proximity. She could even smell his scent - it was clean, like rain or thunderstorms, vastly different from Inuyasha's scent. The thought made her sad and warm at the same time.

God, I must be going nuts. Experience told her that it was generally not a good idea to dwell too much that sort of thing, so Kagome ignored the splash of warmth against her cheeks and tried not to inhale through her nose. Flipping her pharmacology textbook open, she began to peruse it, wondering what would be on the exam - it was one of her hardest classes, because she was

never good at memorizing things like scrips and drug interactions. Biting her lip she thumbed through the pages, trying to decide what to study first, when Sesshoumaru spoke and nearly caused her to fall off her seat.

"Thank you," he said.

Startled, she looked at him. "For what?" she queried, puzzled.

"For the clothes," he replied, not even looking up from the page he was reading.

Kagome felt warmly surprised. "You're - welcome," she said. "It was my pleasure."

Turning away from him she settled back and began to study in the first comfortable silence she had experienced since he had walked through her door, until the rice timer dinged and brought her back to the real world.

* * *

There once was a hanyou.

"What can you possibly find interesting about that book?" Inuyasha groused, looking over her shoulder. "I can't make any fucking sense of it!"

Sighing, Kagome rolled her eyes. "Well, I don't really understand it either, but if I don't pass my next algebra test I'm never actually going to graduate from high school!" she exclaimed.

"Hmph!" Inuyasha exclaimed, turning away from her, the frowning lines on his face looking deeper and angrier in the firelight. Kagome wished that the sun was shining. She hated it when he looked like that, and she could have used the extra light to study by. "You should just stay here with us!"

"Gah!" she exclaimed, slamming the textbook shut, narrowly avoiding smashing her fingers. "Look, Inuyasha, I really need to do this. I have obligations in my own time as well."

"But what good is it?" he demanded. "It doesn't make any sense, and you don't like it, so why do you study such a weird subject?" He leaned over her shoulder again, making her blush at his proximity, and flipped the book open to a random page. Inuyasha didn't seem to notice her discomfort. "You said algebra was math, but there are these little squiggles that don't look like numbers at all!"

"Those are letters," she said, trying to ignore the warmth that spread through her at his closeness. She could smell his body - like sweat and pine trees - and she wanted more in ways that were alien and scary to her. "They represent numbers."

Inuyasha sat back and scratched his head. "Then why don't they just use the numbers they mean?"

Exasperated, Kagome tried to squirm away from him. "Because it's supposed to teach you how to think," she said. "If you have only a few numbers of an equation, and you have the answer to

the equation, you're supposed to be able to figure out how to get the answer with just the few numbers given!"

Blinking, Inuyasha frowned.

"I don't get it," he said.

Frustrated, Kagome waved a hand. "It's just a new way of looking at things, I guess," she told him. "You can use mathematics to describe anything in the universe, since it's a purely manmade system. And algebra is the first step. You can look at a result and figure out the cause of it from the clues in the equation."

"Like... if you find a pile of shit in the woods, you can figure out that a bear was there?" he asked, obviously only having followed part of her explanation.

Kagome looked at him hard with narrowed eyes. He always said things like that so innocently, but she secretly suspected that he cursed only to shock her. "No," she said. "It's more like if you find a pile of - of bear shit in a place where there aren't any bears, you can figure out that someone picked it up and put it there to fertilize their crops."

Inuyasha looked shocked. "Kagome!" he said, clearly scandalized.

"What?" she asked innocently, blinking at him in the firelight. Her momentary attraction to him had faded beneath her struggle to force such a rude word from her normally polite lips. She now just wanted to giggle like crazy at the look on his face. She could surprise him, too, she realized with satisfaction.

"Keh! Whatever," he said, turning away. "I still think you shouldn't have to study it if you don't like it."

"Well, that's not the way the world works," Kagome informed his back.

Sighing, she turned back to her book and tried to concentrate, but beneath her eyes and in the firelight the numbers dipped and danced and bled, until she couldn't make sense of them any longer.

* * *

Splashing water over her oily face, Kagome looked at herself in the bathroom mirror and groaned at her reflection. Dark circles clung to the skin beneath her eyes and her hair was limp and dull. Still, on the whole, she looked better than she had last Thursday so things were looking up. It was always nice to look better than death warmed over.

With a little make up and a brush through the hair, I'll look as good as new, she determined. And then it's a little bit of breakfast, and then I'll go to University, and take my biochem exam.

A fluttering in her chest belied the excruciating nervousness she felt by merely pondering the exam. Ever since her high school days, Kagome had developed a severe fear of her exams because they had so often turned out badly, but with practice and a bit of encouragement she

had finally reached a state of calm concerning testing. It had been over a year since she had last run into the lavatory at school and emptied the contents of her stomach, and she was strangely proud of that.

Swirling soap over her face, Kagome scrubbed a little extra to wake herself up before smoothing a light layer of foundation over her skin and dusting it with powder. Running a quick brush through her hair, she pulled it back and twisted it into a coil at the top of her head, securing the thick rope with a few pins. After pulling on a blouse and businesslike skirt she gave herself one last look before closing her eyes and mentally composing herself.

Opening the door, she walked into the living room, head held high.

"Good morning!" she chirped to her house guest, who was once again wearing the thin white yukata, presumably as pajamas. He gave her a dubious glance before turning back to the book in his lap.

Kagome ignored him and opened the refrigerator door, pulling out a carton of milk and pouring herself a glass. Sticking a skillet on the stove, she turned on the heat and grabbed a couple of eggs, breaking them gently on the side of the pan and pouring them inside. She hummed a little in her preparations.

"Where are you going?"

Slightly startled, she turned and looked at the demon, sitting composed and cool on the sofa. "What?" she asked, confusion clouding her brow before suddenly realizing that it was early and she was dressed to leave for the first time since he had arrived. "Oh! I have to go to University today and take an exam."

No expression touched Sesshoumaru's face, but she had the distinct impression that he had raised a questioning eyebrow.

She smiled. "I have to go take a test so that I can prove I know enough to be a doctor," she elaborated.

"Indeed?" he said. "You have to pass tests now?"

Kagome nodded. "They don't let just anyone be a healer these days. You have to go through a lot of schooling so you'll be less likely to make mistakes. And of course there's a lot more to know now."

He blinked slowly. "You have to learn about anti-bio-tics?" he said slowly.

Secretly, Kagome was impressed. He hadn't been wasting his time on the couch. "Yup," she replied. "You have to learn about medicines and the way the body works. You have to learn how to take care of people who are really sick and are going to die, and what to do when they're all torn up, too."

The demon cocked his head to the side, long silver hair brushing his cheek, and appeared to consider this. "You go to... University?"

She nodded. "Uh-huh. There I go to classes and learn about all the things I have to know to be a doctor."

"Classes?"

"Erm..." Kagome bit her lip and looked up at the ceiling. "A lot of people attend a class held by a teacher, who tells us what we need to know for each subject."

"Ah," he said. "I see."

Kagome flashed him a smile and turned back to her eggs, scooping them out of the pan and flipping them onto a plate. Walking the short distance to the table, Kagome sat down and shoveled her breakfast down her throat while casting a critical eye over her notes one last time. Biochemistry had never been her best subject, but it was better than pharmacology, which was all memorization. Biochem, on the other hand, was full of equations that she could at least wrap her head around and figure out the correct answer.

Biting her lip, Kagome squinted at a particularly indecipherable squiggle in the margin that she eventually deduced was a rather poor sketch of her teacher. What was I thinking, slacking off in this class? she mentally moaned. Well, today it was time to pay the piper, one way or another. A tickle of nausea stirred in her stomach, and Kagome spat as discreetly as possible into a napkin before taking a swig of milk and rising from the table to dump the dishes in the sink.

Deep breaths, she told herself. You'll do fine.

"Nervous?"

Frowning, she looked into the living room, where Sesshoumaru sat still as a statue.

"How did you know?" she demanded.

He didn't look up from the book in front of him. "You smell... ill."

Feeling her lips twist unhappily, Kagome tossed the bile-dampened napkin in the trash can. "Sorry," she said, suddenly embarrassed. She stared at her sensible shoes, and tried to quell the nervousness.

"Don't be."

She looked up, shocked. "What?" she asked, wondering if she had heard correctly.

As if making sure she could hear what he was saying, Sesshoumaru gave a theatrical sniff and delicately turned a page.

"You will be fine," he told her.

"What?" she said again.

Sesshoumaru ignored her. Not knowing what else to say, Kagome muttered a quick word of thanks, grabbed her satchel, and left to take her exam.

* * *

At her informal study session on Wednesday, Kagome looked up from her seat to find Yoshi staring at her with a weird intensity that reminded her of the time when they were dating.

"What?" she demanded. She wondered if she had a piece of salad stuck in her teeth. Lips closed, she self-consciously ran her tongue over her teeth.

"There's this girl," Yoshi started.

Here we go, she thought, annoyed. "Might I remind you that we need to be studying?" she said. "Seeing how the exam is tomorrow and all."

Yoshi huffed impatiently. "I'm going to fail it," he said flatly. "I hate pharm."

"You'll never be a doctor then," she told him.

Smacking a hand against the table, Yoshi looked annoyed. Kagome glanced around nervously, hoping that they weren't disturbing anyone else. "We're all only here because our parents wanted us to be," he said impatiently."

"I'm not," Kagome told him.

"You don't count," he said.

Her heart clenched painfully at those words. "Sorry," she said, glancing down at the book in front of her momentarily, not wanting him to see that he had hurt her.

"Whatever," he said airily. "The point is, I need to talk to you."

"Isn't this the sort of thing that's better to talk to one of your guy friends about?" she asked.

"I've never dated any of my guy friends," he told her.

Sighing, Kagome folded her hands on the table. "Yoshi-kun," she began, before what he was saying actually hit her with a little trickle of cold in her heart.

"You want to date one of my friends, is that it?" she asked.

Yoshi nodded. "I just wanted you to know first. Miyu and I are dating."

Frowning, Kagome tilted her head. "Okay," she said. "Now are we going to study or what?"

"You're okay with this?"

I don't know, she thought. Yes. No. I miss... "Yes, I'm fine," she told him. "We broke up three years ago."

Yoshi made a helpless gesture. "Well, you were always hung up on that other guy, so I didn't know if you would take this badly."

"I'm fine," she repeated.

"Great!" Yoshi said. "Then you won't mind if I skip out on our studying?"

"What?"

"Miyu and I have a date," he said, already stuffing his books into his satchel. "And I don't want to keep her waiting."

"But - "

Yoshi was already on his feet. "Thanks, Kagome!" he said, tossing her a wink over his shoulder as he walked quickly out of the library, leaving her alone.

" - what about the test?" she muttered, to no one but herself.

Weaving her fingers into her hair, Kagome bent over the textbook and tried to focus. It worked for a little while, but after finding herself staring off into space and thinking dark thoughts for the third time in fifteen minutes, Kagome concluded that she had studied enough. Sighing, she stood and gathered her things, and managed to make it out of the library just in time for her phone to ring.

It was Kayoko.

"Kagome, can you come over?" she asked. She sounded as though she had been crying, and Kagome felt her heart hitch sympathetically. Even though this happened once a month when Kayoko dumped or was dumped by her current squeeze, she always seemed so happy about her new relationships that it was a disappointment for Kagome when they ended. She suspected that she was living vicariously through the lives of her friends, but Kagome had always figured that she was due for some pleasure in a relationship, even if the relationship in question was not her own.

But even though she found herself sympathetic, the clock told her that she should be getting home and in bed.

"I'm really sorry, Kayoko-chan," she said, "but I really have to get home. I have an exam in the morning."

"Oh please!" her friend wailed, and Kagome had to wince and pull the phone from her ear.

"I can't!" she said. "I really am sorry!"

"Oh, fine." Kayoko sounded like she was pouting. "I'll just go eat a pint of ice cream and cry in the bathtub."

"Don't drown," Kagome told her absently, fumbling with the keys to her car.

"I'll do my best. Maybe Arisu loves me and will come over."

"Hey!" Kagome exclaimed. "I love you!"

But Kayoko had already hung up. Patience at an end, Kagome slammed the phone shut and slid into the driver's seat. Stupid friends, she thought.

She drove home, feeling tired and lonely and not in the mood for anyone else's drama, and more than anything she wanted to be alone, but she wasn't going to be afforded that luxury. Even when alone in her room now, she could feel Sesshoumaru's presence. Cursing silently in language that would have made her blush only a few years ago, Kagome pulled into her parking space and got out, grabbing her satchel and walking heavily up the stairs to her little flat.

Kagome withdrew her keys before pushing open the door. She didn't bother to lock it now that she had her own demon burglar alarm in residence, but habit died hard, and she still got her keys ready before entering. Tossing the heavy keyring on the small table next to the door, Kagome kicked off her shoes and let her hair down.

Sesshoumaru was sitting in the dark. Apparently he had finished all his books and had figured out the remote control for her television set. She wondered if it confused him at all to see the tiny moving pictures of people and the strange drawings flash across the screen, but she quickly decided that she didn't care. He'd probably read about it in one of the books she'd given him.

"I'm back," she said, superfluously. It was the polite thing to do, even though he was sitting only five feet away from her.

Sesshoumaru turned his head to look at her. "Welcome home," he said. "I trust your study session -" the phrase was clearly unfamiliar to him, and he rolled it around in his mouth before continuing " - was fruitful?"

Kagome shrugged. "I guess," she said tiredly. She didn't feel like telling him the polite little lies she'd always told people, because he didn't seem to care for platitudes. The truth just seemed better.

"I see," he said, though he probably didn't understand at all. Oddly, she felt a pang of gratitude that she wouldn't be forced to explain it to him.

Simply nodding, she walked to the kitchen, poured herself a glass of milk, and crossed through the living room to her bedroom.

Sesshoumaru didn't move as she closed the door behind her, trying to shut him out.

* * *

She was laying down next to a fire, with a little kitsune cuddled in her arms and another girl in her sleeping bag. Only a few feet away, in her spare bedroll, a young boy dreamed, and it

made Kagome smile to know that he didn't have nightmares tonight. Sango was slumbering, as was Shippou, and Kagome found herself looking happily at their peaceful faces in the flickering light of the flames.

She would be leaving soon, too soon, and she didn't want to sleep lest she miss something. It was silly, of course, but she had that fear. Above her head, a little two-tailed cat was curled, purring gently into its own fur.

Kagome sighed, feeling content. She glanced across the little campsite to the monk who was sleeping lightly against a tree with his hands folded in his lap, and she noted with deep satisfaction that the hand that had been gloved for so long was once again bare. He had been saved, and in the firelight she thought his fingers moved with happiness, danced with joy.

Turning over, Kagome gazed up into the trees, and she knew that up there, somewhere, was a hanyou boy, watching over her. She allowed herself to sigh in contentment and stretch one arm high over her head, not wanting to move the other and disturb the little boy who slept against her.

Hovering in the back of her mind was a heavy knowledge. The hanyou boy would become a human boy. The fox kit would grow up. The huntress and the monk would marry and have children. The hunter boy would live with them and care for their children, maybe find a wife. But none of that mattered because here and now they were all together, in one place.

Along the back of her neck, Kagome felt her muscles uncoil from their resting places around her bones. It felt good to know that the enemy was gone, that no one would bother them now. She hadn't slept easy in so, so long.

A whole season. A whole season eaten away by fear and need and the end of the world breathing down the back of the neck.

It was amazing that they'd stayed awake even a second beyond the moment of defeat. It was amazing they hadn't sunk to the ground in sleep immediately. So draining.

But they had survived. Kagome smiled up into the branches above her, finally content.

She wiggled the fingers that were beneath Shippou, trying to keep them working; sometimes he could cut off her circulation, and waking up with a limp, numb hand was never fun. Slowly, she worked feeling into her digits as she gazed dreamily into the fire-gilded branches. She tried to decide what to eat first once she was back at home. Oden, of course. Then curry. And eggs. Chicken with rice and noodles would be good too, or perhaps some radish. Radish sounded really good right now...

Gradually, Kagome was becoming aware of something amiss. Frowning she wiggled her fingers again.

They were wet.

That was odd.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Brow furrowed, Kagome twisted in place and tried to get her hand out from underneath Shippou without waking him, but the little kit was out like a light. Smiling just a little at his sleeping face, Kagome pulled her hand from beneath his body and lifted it to her gaze to inspect the curious wetness.

In the flickering light, viscous red liquid dripped over her fingers and down her wrist. A coppery tang hung in the air, and for a moment Kagome couldn't breathe.

"Sango!" she hissed, high and shrill. "Sango, I'm bleeding!" With her unbloodied hand, Kagome reached across Shippou and shook the other girl.

Whose head rolled back, revealing a throat red and open, slit through to the bone.

Kagome screamed and grabbed Shippou, rocketing out of the sleeping bag, but even as she did so she felt the cold skin of the kit in her arms, and cooling blood was spilling down her front. He was dead in her arms. She dropped him in horror, and he hit the ground like a rag doll.

The coppery smell was thick in the air now, and she was crying so hard she couldn't see, but she didn't have to see, because she knew they were all dead.

She dropped to her knees. "Inuyasha!" she screamed, throat scraping raw, eyes blinded with tears, heart filled with knives, life at an end.

"Inuyashaaaaaa!"

From somewhere high above her, blood dripped down from the branches, pattering down to rest on the dead autumn leaves.

Kagome screamed and screamed and screamed.

Kagome woke up in the heavy night and sat straight up in bed, screaming.

With difficulty, she choked on the scream and stilled her throat, though her heart hammered on, and her throat burned with her heavy gulps of air.

It was always this way when she had that dream - shivering uncontrollably, sweat pouring down her body, and the past feeling so close she could touch it. Bending over where she sat, Kagome held her face and forcibly calmed her breathing as she listened to her heart pound like thunder, as though seeking a way out of her chest.

Months, she thought. It had been months since she had last dreamed that horrible nightmare. Months since she had last woken up with a cry in her throat and a blade through her chest.

"God," she mumbled. "God."

Kagome kicked the blankets from the bed and scrambled out of the tangled web of sheets. Grabbing her dressing gown, she pulled it on and knotted it at the waist before opening the door and pacing with a single-mindedness of purpose to the kitchen, highly conscious of the demon asleep on the couch.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

It was dark, but she knew just what she was looking for. Above the refrigerator there was a small cupboard, and without having to look where she was going she stopped just short of hitting her nose on the door of the icebox. Stretching, Kagome opened the cupboard above it, and her fingers barely brushed the neck of the bottle stowed there before closing around the smooth glass and drawing it out. Pausing, she shifted the bottle from one hand to the other, feeling its familiar weight.

A bitter smile graced her features, unseen in the darkness.

"Hm," she muttered quietly to herself. "Guess I wasn't done with this."

With still trembling fingers, she unscrewed the cap and felt the sharp smell of alcohol hit her nose. Without bothering to grab a glass, Kagome took a swig of the cheap whiskey, and felt it burn all the way down.

Coughing, she spat into the sink.

"Ugh," she whispered before taking another hit.

That one nearly caused her to toss up whatever remained of her dinner, but after a few quick, deep breaths the feeling of nausea passed. Vision finally adjusting to the darkness, Kagome eyed the brown liquid inside the bottle with a strange mixture of love and revulsion. It was disgusting and horrible and a bad habit to have, but it helped her make it through the night, kept the nightmares at bay. Sighing, she took a final swallow and replaced the cap through the tears it brought to her eyes. She guessed she'd polished off a fourth of the bottle. Belatedly, she remembered that she had an exam in the morning.

"Aeeugh," she muttered again, grabbing a paper towel from the counter top and snuffling into it. Whiskey was terrible, but it did clear out her sinuses like industrial grade bleach.

Already she could feel a deep, languorous warmth spread its loosening tendrils through her limbs and pool in her belly like fire. As she replaced the bottle, she wobbled a little on her tiptoes. After the bottle had been stowed to her satisfaction, she leaned gently against the refrigerator, letting her head rest against its cool surface as she felt the tension slowly drain in the quiet of the kitchen.

"Trouble sleeping?"

"Oh!" she said quietly, turning to see Sesshoumaru staring at her, golden eyes turned into an eerie yellow color in the flat blue light of the nighttime. He was lying on the sofa, long white hair draped over the arm, so long that it curled on the floor. The blanketwas thrown him in a haphazard manner. At his throat, the yukata gaped enough to reveal an expanse of luminous skin almost to his shoulder.

He looked more disheveled than she had ever seen him, with one hand trailing on the floor and the other buried in his own hair, elbow propped against the back of the sofa, yellow eyes looking at her askance. He was like some kind of beautiful phantom, almost real, a memory of reality, come to haunt her.

Kagome swallowed, trying to remember what he had asked her; the alcohol was already taking effect. "Um," she said, searching.

She placed a hand against her forehead.

"Nightmares?" he suggested quietly.

Relieved, she nodded. "Yes," she replied. She looked down at the floor beneath her feet, noticed that it needed cleaning. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

She heard the sound of cloth moving over cloth. Against her better judgement, she looked up.

He had propped himself up on his elbow now, hand hanging off the edge of the cushion, other arm draped over his waist, head raised and eyes now leveled at her.. The yukata had slipped ever so slightly from his shoulder. In the dark, he gave her a calculating look.

"What do you dream of?" he finally asked.

On Kagome's alcohol-heightened ears, his voice moved like liquid velvet. She found the sensation frightening - she had never had this much to drink when anyone else was around. Her friends would have been shocked to see her like this.

Swallowing, she tried to hold his eyes. "My friends," she told him. Her throat was dry.

"Friends?"

She shifted from one foot to the other. "The huntress and the kitsune and the monk and... and your brother."

He said nothing, merely waited for her to fill the silence.

Nervously, she tried to appease him. "I..." she looked down at her feet and scuffed a toe against the linoleum."I dream of them dead. They always die in horrible ways, like with their throats slit, or eviscerated, or suffocated. It's awful."

He regarded her. "But they are dead. Did you not see them die?"

Strangely, belatedly, Kagome realized that he didn't understand.

"I don't know what happened to them because I haven't lived for five hundred years," she said. "I traveled through time to get to... the past. When I met you."

For a time, he didn't reply, and she tried not to stare at his bare shoulder; the disarray was upsetting to her. She wanted to either move it into place or smooth the cloth back from the other shoulder.

The longer he remained silent, the more she wondered if she had confused him, and she was on the verge of plunging into the entire story when he nodded slowly. "You were born...?"

A half smile graced her lips. "Twenty-five years ago. When I turned fifteen, ten years ago, I found a way to travel through time, where I met... your brother."

"Ah," he said, as if it all made sense to him now, and perhaps it did.

"So, no. I did not see them die."

"Ah," he said again, but longer this time, and more regretful.

Biting her lip, she shifted in place again. The air around her felt strange and sharp, as though the world were waiting for something. "Do you..." she began, then trailed off.

He waited and watched her, unmoving. "Do... I...?" he finally prompted.

"Do you know what happened to them?" she blurted out.

Slowly, he shook his head. "Only Inuyasha," he qualified as her heart sank into her stomach.

"What?" she asked. "How?"

She was unable to articulate the question.

Kagome stood in the doorway from the kitchen to the living room, legs crawling with pins and needles, alcohol clouding her mind, and waited to hear how the boy she loved had died.

"A wound," Sesshoumaru said abruptly. "He was still young,"

Her heart stuttered and stopped. "From fighting?" she breathed.

"No. From farming. The scythe slipped and sliced his leg open, and he died of a fever afterward, I was told."

Infection, she thought dumbly. She could have saved him, if he had been here. A shot of penicillin, and he wouldn't have had to die.

"Why didn't you save him?" she asked, voice strained. "You had that sword..." She glanced to the side of the room where Tenseiga sat, serene and peaceful.

"Hn." That little derisive laugh. "Too late," he said, looking away, as if to dismiss her, or as though he were ashamed. She couldn't tell which. She watched as his silken hair fell over his bare shoulder. She took a step forward before stopping, hands slightly raised.

"I see," she replied, biting her lip. "I see."

There was an awkward pause before -

"Alcohol, miko?"

She blinked at the sudden subject change. "It helps me sleep... when I have nightmares."

"It is strong," he said, tone noncommittal.

Kagome almost smiled at that. "Sometimes," she said, walking a little further into the room, balance a bit askew, "it takes strong stuff."

"That," Sesshoumaru replied, "is a truth worth remembering."

She had reached the side of the sofa, and she looked down at him, feeling as though she were standing on the edge of a blade, at the top of a cliff. There was wind blowing at her back.

He looked up at her, golden eyes shining dimly. "You should go to sleep, miko."

As if of its own accord, her hand fluttered out into the space between them, and in her fingers she caught the slightly rough cotton fabric of his yukata. Gently she pulled it over his shoulder, covering him. Her eyes never left his.

"Don't catch cold," she whispered.

He didn't reply.

Kagome turned away from him, and, fighting to keep her balance, went to bed.

* * *

There once was an orphaned kitsune.

Tail in air, Shippou was digging through her backpack, looking for candy. He was always looking for candy, Kagome reflected gloomily. She was going to turn him into a diabetic.

"Shippou-chan," she scolded. "It's not nice to just dive into someone's things and root around. You never know what could be in there." Firmly, she placed her hands around his waist and lifted him bodily from the bag, taking care to not tickle her own nose with his tail. Shippou squirmed, kicking his little feet as she righted him in her arms.

"But I neeeeeeed it," he whined, holding up a lollipop that he had unearthed from god-knew-where.

Wrinkling her nose, Kagome plucked an enormous piece of lint from the surface of the candy. "It's dirty, Shippou," she pointed out, shaking the fuzz from her fingers, even though experience taught her that Shippou would eat anything if it promised to give him a sugar high.

"But delicious!" he insisted, popping it into his mouth. His lips split into an enormous grin of satisfaction, the skin around his mouth already sticky from the sugar.

Kagome sighed and dug around in her backpack with her free hand, searching for a handkerchief with which to clean up the inevitable mess. After a few moments of rummaging she was rewarded with an only slightly dingy square of cloth. Shippou was already chomping down, unable to contain his joy at having something sugary to chew on.

Sitting down on a nearby rock, Kagome opened a bottle of water and poured a little bit onto the handkerchief to dampen it. "Hold still," she commanded, turning him around in her lap. Against

her skin, his fox feet felt alien and strange, and his soft tail made her shiver a little as it brushed against the slight, fine hairs of her own legs.

Obediently oblivious, Shippou lifted his face to hers and endured her ministrations. With rough affection, Kagome carefully cleared the sticky detritus from around his lips and chin. When she was satisfied with his level of cleanliness, she nodded firmly and folded the handkerchief, tucking it away. "All done!" she announced, clapping her hands and looking at the little kitsune.

She paused in mid-clap.

He was crying.

Not screaming, tantrum crying, but weeping, rather. As she watched, his eyes filled with tears that welled up and spilled over, dripping slowly down round cheeks and dropping down to be lost in his clothing. There was nothing in his face that indicated his weeping; his chin was still, his nose was dry and cool, and his brow was only slightly furrowed. But still he wept, a silent cycle of tears rising up and spilling over, then running down, down to his clothes, down to his hands, down to the earth.

"Shippou-chan!" she wanted to say, but it came out as a slightly strangled whisper. "What's wrong?"

The little kit shook his head. "Mama," he said, and in his eyes Kagome could see the shadow of memory, moving quietly, drawing out his sadness, filling him up with fear and loss.

He was always so brave, always trying to protect her, but she forgot, forgot often, that he was just a little boy. He missed his mother.

Kagome wrapped her arms around him and held him close as the tears kept coming.

After a while, he struggled a little against her and she pulled back immediately, hand coming up to smooth his hair from his face. "Better?" she asked.

In the instant between the sad shining eyes and the shaky smile, she thought he gave her a very odd, very old look, but it had to have been her imagination, and she forgot it the moment the little kit nodded.

"Don't tell Inuyasha," he said.

Kagome rubbed his nose against hers. "Our secret," she promised, giving him a little smile. "Our secret."

* * *

Her eyes were glued shut.

That was the first thing she noticed the next day when she surfaced in the world of the conscious. The second thing she noticed was that she felt slightly woozy, and determined that she had consumed a decent amount of whiskey the previous night. Which meant that she had

woken up screaming from a nightmare. Which meant that no doubt, from what she could remember, she had said something horribly embarrassing to Sesshoumaru.

She tried to decide which was more embarrassing: waking up screaming, or getting caught sneaking nips of whiskey. After a moment of peeling her eyelids open, she determined that both were equally humiliating, and that Sesshoumaru, being the sensitive man he no doubt was, would probably bring it up in some hurtful way. After all, he'd never failed to taunt his brother mercilessly, or, for that matter, anyone else he found in his way.

It was a disheartening way to wake up, made even worse by the fact that her pharm exam was in two hours.

Kicking off her sheets, Kagome threw an arm over her forehead and groaned. Of all the nights to have a dream like that, she thought, it had to be last night.

With great delicacy, she pulled herself into a sitting position, trying not to jar her head too much; her brain felt like razors wrapped in cotton, and her joints felt rusty, but all in all it could have been worse. Swinging her legs off the bed, Kagome stood and walked into the bathroom and began to draw water for a quick splash around in the tub.

Scrubbing her eyes with a bit of cold water, Kagome waited for the tub to fill.

Then she remembered that Inuyasha had died of an infection, and then she was crying into her washcloth, falling hard to her knees in a move that jarred her to her teeth.

She hadn't been able to absorb it last night, it hadn't seemed real. In all honesty, it still didn't feel real this morning, but she knew the abstract facts, and it was horrible to contemplate.

Inuyasha, who had never cried nor complained about an injury, who had fought on through blood and pain, had been felled by an infection. He'd sliced his leg open farming for god's sake. Sliced it probably through the muscle, infesting the wound with vicious microorganisms that ate away at his skin, turning it black, seeping through his leg, crawling into his body and filling him with agonizing sickness.

Inuyasha, strong and brave and full of a bumbling loyalty, dead in the ground. Dead because she had convinced him to become human. Dead, because she still held the wish of Kikyou in her soul. She had wanted the jewel to disappear, had wanted Inuyasha to choose the correct path. She couldn't even remember now, didn't even know why she wanted him to be human in the first place, because she'd loved the hanyou, loved him, and he died because of her.

Kagome sobbed into cold terrycloth, and tried to quell the paralyzing sadness that threatened to pull her under.

She'd always known he was dead, but she hadn't known how. And now she knew. She'd always been able to pretend that he had died old and surrounded by family, with a wife and children and grandchildren, the way life was supposed to be - even though it hurt to think he could love someone after losing her, she could lie to herself quite well and pretend she wanted him to be happy - but now the illusion was shattered, and it couldn't be pieced together again.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

He had died in agony.

She was sobbing loudly, embarrassing heaves that could surely be heard through the thin walls. Angrily, she gulped air and tried to distance herself, but it only worked half-way.

Kagome had no idea what to do now that she was completely alone, really, truly alone. She had memories, but they weren't the same, and the people in those memories had died hundreds of years ago. She bit her lip against another sob, and tried to figure out what was next. She wished that grief came with a step-by-step program.

Scraping the tears from her face but still weeping, Kagome dimly realized that the water was still running. She had to turn off the water in the tub, and on bruised knees she moved to do so.

And then she realized that there were still tears falling from her eyes, but she had to get in the tub. After a while she would have to get out again, and go eat breakfast, and go take an exam and endure the world without Inuyasha, without Sango and Miroku and Shippou, but right here, right now, she had to take a bath.

Kagome crawled into the tub and scrubbed her skin so hard it turned pink.

After a while, she crawled out and dried herself off. Somewhere in between, she had stopped crying, but now her eyes were swollen and her nostrils were stuffed with mucous, and she felt like a car wreck. Almost angrily she blew her nose and splashed cold water against her eyes, trying to wash them out. Grabbing a brush she drew it violently through her hair, scraping the bristles against her scalp with such force that her eyes began to water all over again. Kagome gave up and pulled her hair into a ponytail before stepping into her skirt and shrugging on her blouse.

Listlessly she wandered into the kitchen and went through the movements of making a piece of toast for which she really didn't have the appetite.

Sesshoumaru was sitting at the table, idly thumbing through one of her medical texts. She wondered if he would say something to her about last night, or even this morning. Surely he'd heard her through the wall.

Even though he wasn't looking at her, Kagome blushed and turned away, suddenly mad that he made her feel uncomfortable in her own home, but that feeling vanished like smoke in the wind. She truly was too drained to care now. Let him mock, she thought wearily, pouring out a glass of orange juice. Then at least one of us will get some entertainment out of this.

Her toast popped up and she buttered the warm, crunchy bread quickly before placing it on a plate, grabbing her glass, and sitting down opposite the demon.

Slowly, Kagome forced her mouth to open, and her hand to bring the toast to her lips. She tore a chunk away from the bread with her teeth and chewed mechanically.

It tasted like cardboard in her mouth. Sesshoumaru still hadn't looked up from the book. Maybe he was too disgusted with her to even look at her, though Kagome found that thought even less comforting than the idea that he would find her pain amusing.

With difficulty, she swallowed the lump of badly chewed toast and washed it down with a sip of juice. Looking back at the square of bread, there seemed to be just too much of it there. Too much to eat; the thought of forcing so much toast down her throat suddenly seemed exhausting. Carefully, Kagome placed the piece of toast back on the plate and pushed it slightly away before bringing her fingers to her temples and massaging the skin there, trying to force away a nonexistent pain.

"Nervous?"

Kagome looked up tiredly, but she couldn't seem to comprehend the words that the demon had spoken. "What did you say?" she asked softly, feeling her brow draw down into a slight frown.

Sesshoumaru looked up from his book. "I asked if you were nervous about your exam today," he said quietly.

Kagome blinked. "A little. It's my worst subject."

He nodded, turning back to the book in front of him and turning a page. "You will be fine," he said, an echo of himself.

Kagome swallowed hard. "Thank you," she replied quietly, looking down at her hands. Of their own volition, her fingers were massaging her palms, as though trying to soothe herself back into some semblance of a functioning human being. Kagome sucked her upper lip into her mouth and bit down hard, trying to wake herself up, make herself do the things she had to do to get through the day. Nothing was different today than it was yesterday, except that her heart was broken more than usual. Nothing was different, it was all the same, and she still had obligations to fill.

Her hands wouldn't stop rubbing each other, hard and methodical. She pressed her lips together.

"You should eat," the demon said.

Kagome nodded hesitantly. "I know," she replied. "It's hard this morning."

When she realized what she had said, she kicked herself mentally, suddenly even more uncomfortable than she had been when she walked into the kitchen. She glanced up to find him regarding her with his cool, steady gaze.

He was quiet for a while, but when he spoke, it was short and to the point.

"Yes," he agreed. "It is."

Around her heart, an iron band loosened. Kagome took a shuddering breath.

"Eat," Sesshoumaru commanded, turning back to the book he held in his large, open hand and narrowing his eyes with interest in whatever was written there.

Kagome finished her meal and rose from the table to wash her dishes.

"Leave them," the demon said. "I will take care of them."

The shock nearly caused her to drop the dishes on the floor. "What?" she said, whirling around, pain forgotten.

Sighing as though it taxed him to explain himself, Sesshoumaru looked at her from the corner of his eye. "You will be late. I will take care of them," he repeated.

Startled, Kagome glanced at the clock on the wall where it measured out the even moments of time, and realized that if she left now, she just might possibly make it in time to be late for the start of her exam.

"Oh no!" she exclaimed, dumping the dishes unceremoniously in the sink. "I'm so late it's not even funny!"

Sesshoumaru, as though to prove her wrong, snickered.

Kagome found she didn't care. Grabbing her satchel, she quickly thumbed through the books inside. "Oh no!" she almost yelled. "Where's my pharm textbook?"

Casting a panicked glance around the room, her gaze fell on the book in Sesshoumaru's hands. Without even pausing, she ran across the kitchen floor, plucked her pharmaceutical's textbook from his fingers with a frantic "sorry!" and ran to the entryway where she shoved her shoes onto her feet.

"Thank you!" she called over her shoulder as she raced out the door. She was rewarded with a clear view of Sesshoumaru's nonplused face right before the door closed, and she pounded down the stairs to her car, sadness and memory plucking at her heels.

She staunchly ignored both, rammed the car into gear, and headed for school, but even then she could still feel him hovering over her shoulder.

* * *

Kagome burst through the front door a few hours later and struck a happy pose, flinging her arms into the air - nearly knocking herself unconscious with a grocery bag as she did so - and kicking a shoe off her foot and into the wall.

"I'm home!" she announced.

"I see," Sesshoumaru remarked flatly, not turning away from the television set.

Kagome deflated a bit, but quickly rallied. "I did well on my test!" she said, kicking off her other shoe as she tried to transmit some of her enthusiasm to him. She desperately hoped he would

take her lead - maybe if someone else was happy, she could ward off the melancholy for a few more hours. Already the thrill of passing her exam was fading, and the creeping tendrils of pain that she had left behind were crawling around her ankles again. Please be interested, she thought, grinning a hollow grin.

"Hn," he said, flipping the channel. Apparently some male behavior crossed species, because within two seconds of changing the station he was clearly discontent, and did it again.

Kagome sighed as he began to flip through the small rota of stations. Her shoulders slumped and she crossed her arms, no easy feat with the grocery bags still looped over her wrists. "Fine then," she told him, endeavoring to sound nonchalant. "I guess I won't make a special dinner for you."

Sesshoumaru stopped flipping.

"What?" he asked, as though he hadn't heard her correctly.

"I said," she repeated as she flounced into the kitchen to place her purchases in the refrigerator, "that if you don't want to celebrate with me, I won't make a special dinner for you."

Sesshoumaru was silent as she rummaged around. A few seconds later she heard him flipping channels again, but this time at a slower pace, and she smiled a little through the small stinging pain in her heart. He was so like his brother in some ways - Inuyasha had never liked to let her know what he was feeling as well - and she could almost smell the little emotions that he was covering up.

On the other hand, it had been only a week since he had come into her home and she had yet to see him eat. Placing her purchases on the counter, Kagome leaned on the half-wall that separated the living room from the kitchen and pinned Sesshoumaru with a stare and waited for him to notice her.

Come on, she thought, I can wait just as long as you.

He continued to stare straight ahead, finally settling on an educational program detailing modern forensics techniques.

Kagome stared at him and counted to one hundred in her head. Then she curled her toes fifty times, just to see what it felt like. Her final verdict was: not terribly good. The end result was a foot cramp and heightened annoyance at Sesshoumaru's refusal to acknowledge her existence.

"Hey," she finally blurted, unable to wait any longer.

Sesshoumaru remained immobile except for his eyes, which slid in her direction.

"Do you eat? At all?" she asked him, surreptitiously trying to massage life back into her cramped foot with her own toes.

"Sometimes," he answered.

"What do you mean, sometimes?"

He tilted his head slightly. "I mean sometimes. But it is not required."

Kagome frowned, leaning further into the room. "Not required? I thought everyone had to eat at some point."

Sesshoumaru made an ambiguous little noise in the back of his throat. "There is no longer any need," he told her.

"Why not?"

If he had been a more emotive man, she was certain he would have sighed. "I am too old," he replied. "I require almost nothing now." There was a flat quality to his voice. Kagome shifted, suddenly at odds with him again, uncertain as to how to proceed. She licked her lips.

"Well, do you like eating?" she asked him desperately.

Again the little tilt of the head. "Sometimes," he said again, voice slightly more genial.

Suddenly, Kagome just wanted to have a nice dinner, just wanted to sit down and have a nice conversation and be normal for a moment, or as normal as possible with a youkai lord in her flat. She pasted a bright smile on her face that would have made her mother proud. "Well, I hope you like steak, because I don't think I can eat all of it by myself," she informed him lightly, and turned around before he could reply.

Propping her hand on her hip, Kagome chewed on the inside of her cheek, contemplating how to cook the steak. In the end she decided that peppering and pan searing was the best option. Despite the fact that it was barely time for lunch, Kagome determined that she had earned her steak, and she was going to eat it now.

Stubbornly she refused to think about the things that poked at her mind with skeletal fingers and focused on her slight victory today. She'd won against the forces of evil as embodied by her pharmacology class, and she was damn well going to enjoy it. Tears could wait until later.

As she peppered the steaks, Kagome idly wondered, the thoughts airy and without weight, if she could defer the tears forever. If she could avoid the grasping fingers of memory long enough, could she slip free of them for the rest of her life?

Slowly, suddenly trapped in thought, Kagome rubbed the pepper into the meat.

A day of sidestepping? she thought softly. A week? A month? A year?

Her hands had stopped moving.

If I could run, could I spend eternity without crying?

The thought fluttered across her mind, tickling her with sadness. Ironically, it almost made her weep.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Biting down so hard on her lip that she thought she would draw blood, Kagome concentrated on the task in front of her.

With soothing, mechanical movements, Kagome found her mind calming down, and after flipping the steaks over, she propped a hand on her hip and looked critically at the meal.

"Needs something more," she muttered. Walking briskly to the refrigerator, Kagome stood on her tiptoes and grabbed the bottle of whiskey. Unscrewing the cap she splashed a bit into the pan and watched the flames lick over the steak with satisfaction.

"More alcohol?" asked Sesshoumaru, only a foot behind her.

Her heart stuttered and stopped in shock before kicking in again. Lips thinning in consternation, Kagome refused to turn around. "Just for flavor," she said, moving the cuts of steak around in the pan. They didn't need to be tended, but she wanted to at least look busy. Something about Sesshoumaru inspired the need to appear useful. "It gives the meat a little extra kick."

"Indeed," he replied.

Kagome had the distinctly unpleasant feeling that he was making fun of her. "It'll taste good, I promise," she told him, turning around slightly so she could see him. From the corner of her eye she noted that his hands were tucked into his sleeves and his bangs - had she really cut them herself? - were hanging over his eyes, shielding her from his scrutiny, or maybe he from hers.

She heard him sniff. "Doubtful," he said, low and bored.

As though he had placed a finger on a fault line, Kagome felt her fragile composure suddenly crack and shatter beneath the force of the sadness pressing in, and loss poured down.

She wanted to get angry. She wanted to throw the still licking flames of whiskey into his hair. She wanted to scream and hit him for being too late, for being so silent and so not Inuyasha, for having his hair and eyes, but not his spirit. She wanted to cry.

Kagome whirled around and opened her mouth, raising her hand to wag a finger, or poke him, or slap his beautiful, passive face.

Then his hand was on her jaw, looking down into her eyes, and she was staring up at him. In the tense moment, she realized that he was still painfully perfect, still smooth skin and otherworldly eyes, looking ethereal and unbearably angelic. His lips were slightly wet - he must have licked them - and a tendril of silver hair had fallen against her bare arm, brushing her skin. He was focused on her, golden eyes narrow, and in his neck she saw his pulse leap and jump.

She felt weak and her fingers twitched, wanting to touch him. He couldn't be real, his fingers weren't on her skin, no one who looked like him could possibly be alive.

He was so close she could smell him. He smelled like blank paper. He smelled like smoke on snow.

Time stretched thin, like the string of a violin, waiting to be plucked.

Sesshoumaru tightened his grip.

Sharp pain lanced through her bones where his fingers dug in to her jaw, and Kagome heard herself make a small noise in her throat as her knees buckled and tears sprang to her eyes. No longer entranced, she was angry again.

Sesshoumaru jerked her face, hard, giving her a painful shake, eyes boring down into hers. He opened his mouth.

"Don't," he growled.

Ridiculously, her brain noted that his voice still rasped along the edges, still recovering from disuse.

One by one, he lifted his fingers from her chin and stepped back. Slowly Kagome lifted her own hands to her face and massaged the flesh there, certain she would have bruises.

He could kill her. He could crush her bones, melt her skin. There was no subduing spell now, and he was dangerous.

And Inuyasha was really gone, so it didn't really matter.

Kagome turned, shut off the stove, and brushed past the unmoving demon. With even, measured steps, she moved into her bedroom and closed the door behind her. Drained and empty, she leaned against it. It was a long time before she gathered the motivation to push away from the wall.

Wearily, she slid into bed, and tried to sleep through the sadness and the fear.

* * *

She thought about asking him to leave. She probably couldn't make him leave, but if she wanted him gone, it would have been worth a shot. Kagome considered, very carefully, getting up from bed, marching into the living room, and asking him to go. To gather the few belongings he had now, and make a quick stage left from her life.

But she didn't. After a thorough examination of her jaw in the mirror, she determined that she wasn't injured in the slightest, despite the fact that he was much stronger than she and could have shattered it at any time. On top of that, he had nowhere to go, and she couldn't just do that to him, even if he was unpleasant and sullen.

And she was bored. So she wanted him to stay.

She hadn't realized how deeply she had sunk into her little world, drawing herself away from her friends, downing shots of horrible liquor late at night when it didn't seem to matter, just being away from everyone. For better or worse, a demon on her couch broke that world open. She felt like she was hovering outside the shell, amazed at how dull and tiny her life had become.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Staring at herself in the mirror, Kagome pondered the question of where the bright, ebullient girl she used to be had run, and why that girl had left this quiet, sad woman behind. It was amazing that Sesshoumaru had even recognized her when he woke up. She must still look enough like that girl to have stirred his memory, but she felt as though she had faded a little bit, her colors no longer as bright. She wondered what he had seen as he looked into her eyes.

A sudden vision of him hovering over her in the darkness of the cave flashed across her mind, and she felt his weight on her, pressing her into the earth. The memory of his breath on her skin and his lips in her hair slipped into her mind, and she shivered.

Face warm, she shoved those thoughts away and splashed cold water over her cheeks before vigorously rubbing her face with a towel. Very definitively not thinking about Sesshoumaru, she stripped naked and pulled on a tank top and some pajama bottoms.

Running a hand through her hair, she stepped out into the living room only to find that he wasn't propped against the sofa like she had anticipated. Cursory inspection revealed him to be at her little kitchen table, silver hair falling like water over his shoulders and staring out the window that directly faced the brick wall.

Slowly crossing into the kitchen and stepping to the table, Kagome lowered herself so she was sitting across from him, crossing her arms and leaning her elbows against the wooden surface. "Can't sleep?" she asked quietly, studying his profile.

Sesshoumaru tilted his head in the way that she was slowly beginning to understand was his own version of a shrug. "Perhaps," he said cryptically.

A small smile tilted her lips. "Is that wall interesting?" she asked.

"Not really," he replied. "But it is a very... calming... sight. I find it helps me think."

Kagome was impressed - for such a normally reticent man, he was downright outgoing tonight; she couldn't remember the last time he had so readily answered a question. "Me, too," she agreed. "I wonder what it is about that wall in particular, but everyone seems to love to stare at it."

He didn't respond, though probably because there was no way to adequately reply. She felt silly and inane. Kagome decided to shut up and stare at the wall as well.

For a long time, they sat in, if not companionable, then at least comfortable silence. Kagome found her mind wandering contentedly through her memories of the past week, letting this or that thing tickle her fancy. The kitchen still smelled like steak.

"Um," she said aloud, glancing at the demon in the muted moonlight.

He had been watching her from the corner of her eye, and she bit her lip, feeling warm and uncomfortable. "What did you do with the steak?" she asked in a small voice.

Turning his head slightly in her direction, he shifted his gaze to the refrigerator. "In there," he told her. "After it was done cooking."

Suddenly distracted, Kagome frowned. "You know how to cook?" she asked incredulously.

A tilt of the head. "Heat it until it is no longer bloody," Sesshoumaru replied. "Everyone knows that."

Kagome decided that she could wait until tomorrow to see if the meal was salvageable or carbonized. She opted for smiling at him. "Thank you!" she said brightly. "We can probably have it tomorrow evening."

His eyes slid away. "I already told you that you do not have to waste food on me."

Turning back to the window, Kagome blinked, frustrated. She was entirely unable to apprehend how Sesshoumaru's mind worked. She decided to let it slide, though she was tired of deferring to him.

Staring at the even pattern of bricks, Kagome let her mind wander. In her head, she picked up her annoyance with his stoic nature and turned it over in mental hands. It wasn't so much that he was being cruel, or rude, but... perhaps shy. Or secretive. Uncomfortable with sharing his personal space with her. It was so difficult to get him to speak that his constant, mute presence was slightly unsettling, rather than comforting or exciting.

On the other hand, the air in the kitchen was moving freely, as though there was some sort of unspoken truce between them that she didn't understand. At the back of her mind, a notion slunk through the shadows; mentally she turned and stared at it, hard, and it began to dawn on her that if they were back to being relatively comfortable, then he might be feeling a little guilty for hurting her.

The thought seemed ridiculous, but then again, the things he had done - or rather the things he had failed to do, such as kill, insult, or project general imperious arrogance - since she had awoken him had been strange and different from the Sesshoumaru she had known.

The brick pattern in front of her eyes faded until she could only see the tracks of mortar in the wall, and down one short path she could see them traveling until they reached the fork. They had parted ways, hundreds of years ago, and now that they had stumbled against each other again they looked the same, but beneath the superficial the substantial had altered in ways impossible to recognize.

With slow realization, she turned and looked at him, at his smooth, pale face and glossy, silver hair. He would look young for centuries after she was long gone, but the person beneath would be different. Suddenly he was a stranger, more exotic than he had ever seemed to her, even when she had first seen him, standing on the shoulder of an ogre, cold and beautiful and deftly merciless toward his only brother. And yet, he was still so familiar.

She wondered if he wanted to return to the person he had been, like she did.

"Why did you seal yourself away?" The question popped out, bypassing her mind for review, but as soon as it was out it suddenly seemed very important to know the answer.

Sesshoumaru turned to her and appeared to study her intently, and she suddenly realized how mussed he looked, loose yukata hugging his shoulders, hair dripping down over his chest, bangs falling into his hungry eyes. He looked haunted and hunted, and she couldn't decide if she regretted the question or not.

"You don't - " she began.

"I will tell you," he cut her off.

She snapped her mouth shut abruptly and waited.

He looked her in the eyes, holding her gaze with his own steady stare. "I was tired," he said evenly.

Kagome blinked, feeling as though she were in slow motion. "Tired?" she repeated dumbly.

"Tired," he said again.

"I don't understand," she said quietly.

It might have been her imagination, but it appeared that the corner of his lips twitched, briefly. He sat back a little bit.

"Miko," he said, "do you know how old I am?"

Kagome shook her head. "At least five hundred years?" she guessed. In the quiet of the kitchen, her voice was soft, as though she didn't want to scare him. As though he was timid, and she was coaxing him out of a shell.

"Older," he said. Slowly, he drew a hand out of his sleeve and placed it on the table in front of him, stroking the wood softly with one elegant, tapered finger. "Much older."

"How old?" she asked him.

Instead of answering he looked at her from beneath heavy eyelids, his entire appearance sleepy and sensual, and asked her another question. "Do you know how old my father was when he died?"

Mutely, she shook her head, unwilling to speak. The air was growing palpable and heavy, and she felt heavy and warm as well. She wished he would stop staring at her.

"He was four thousand years old."

Kagome heard herself gasp. "What?" she whispered. "How is that possible? I thought..." She trailed off, too shocked to know what she had thought.

"Youkai do not age the way you do, miko," he murmured, still sleepy-eyed, still hungry and hunted. "The most powerful are born and grow relatively quickly until they are of age. When they do, time slows down."

Kagome was mesmerized. "How much?" she breathed.

"Difficult to say. Different for each youkai. It depends on the strength of blood, mostly, and sometimes it doesn't stop slowing." Moving heavily, Sesshoumaru lifted his hand from the table and lightly placed his fingertips on his brow, shielding half his face from her. The moonlight cast shadows against him, creating hollows that made him look so, so old. He sighed, lips barely moving. "For the most powerful, time lies down and is still."

"You can still die," she said, a little too firmly. "Your father was killed."

The demon gave a short, sharp snort of laughter.

"I saw the demon that killed him," she told him stubbornly. "You can still die, just like he did."

Again, his lips twitched and fluttered, as though he wanted to smile without humor, but couldn't be bothered. "I am not so sure about myself, but he could die. And he did." He dropped the hand from his face. "I suspect that he was tired as well."

In his throat, she saw his muscles work in a swallow, and it was slowly dawning on her what he was saying. "Your mother was powerful as well, wasn't she?" she asked. "And the longer you live, the stronger you become."

"Yes," he replied. "And now the age of youkai has passed, and here I am."

Kagome licked her lips. "What about... what about Rin?" she said, stumbling, mouth dry.

Sesshoumaru turned away, long silver hair sliding over his shoulder as he looked out the window and into a dead end, and didn't answer.

Kagome suddenly didn't want to know how old he was, or how tired he was, or how cold his heart had grown, watching everyone else rise and fall and wither and fade into dust, but there was one more question. "Why were you always so cruel to Inuyasha?" she asked him stubbornly. "He could have lived to be old like you. He had the right blood."

"He would have lived five hundred years, at most," Sesshoumaru murmured, eyes distant, profile still. "So short. Why bother?"

Biting her lip, she felt something in her drop open, like a trapdoor, and she was falling through it. "Why are you here?" she said, voice tiny in the endless cavern beneath.

He didn't deign to answer, and suddenly she was twisted up with guilt, with sudden shame for asking him for things so personal. She felt as though she had trod on a grave. She leaned forward, elbows hitting the table, hands clasped in front of her.

"I'm sorr-" she began.

To her surprise, he turned around and mimicked her position. "No," he said evenly, cutting her off, and then he extended an arm toward her and before she had time to flinch instinctively his hand was on her chin again, just the way it had been when he had caught her in front of the stove.

But this time, he was gentle. His cool, dry fingers ran across her skin in a way that made her breath catch, trapped between her teeth. Softly, he stroked her jaw, as though she were still in pain and he were soothing it away, and where he touched her she felt herself grow warm, and then hot, and the liquid heat dripped down through her throat, into her chest where it flowed over her heart like melted wax.

The world narrowed down to his hand on her face, to his slow caress. Over and over, he stroked her skin, stilling her breath, heating her body.

Then a claw caught her lip, seemingly by accident, and her eyes fluttered with the small stinging sensation.

They were both drawing away suddenly, as though he, or maybe she, had broken the unspoken rules of a contract, and they were no longer allowed to touch in the darkness. Now such things had to wait for another time.

The youkai folded his hands into his sleeves again, and she watched with fascination as his spine stiffened and he went from warm and sleepy-eyed to cool and appraising in the space of a breath. "Perhaps," he said, "you should go to sleep, miko."

Still stunned and strange, Kagome felt her legs twitch, as though his orders bypassed her brain and went straight to her spinal cord; she tucked her legs further beneath her, just to keep them from unfolding and doing his bidding. "If it's all the same to you," she told him quietly, fumbling for the upper hand in her own home, and then grasping it suddenly and unexpectedly, "I'll stay here a little while longer."

A fraction of a second belied his surprise, but he inclined his head in his strange, regal shrug. "As you wish," he said, turning away.

Refusing to look at him, Kagome stared out the window, and waited for her heart to slow.

* * *

There once was a demon huntress.

Naked and alone together in a hot spring, Sango and Kagome both sighed with feminine relief, finally away from Miroku and Inuyasha and Shippou. Kagome could feel the tension draining from her muscles within seconds of sliding into the warm water, and gave a sigh of contentment. She loved - er, liked - Inuyasha and Miroku and Shippou quite a bit, but sometimes it was just good to escape from them, if only for a precious half-hour of peace.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

It was always something with the boys. Shippou wanted to be held, or Miroku wanted to talk, or Inuyasha wanted to fight; their presence was ever present, even when they took a break to sleep, and she knew Sango felt the same way. They were so... needy.

Only a conscious effort smoothed the frown away from her brow, and Kagome concentrated on the stiff muscles in her legs, focusing on each one and forcing it to relax. It was a difficult task, but the result was well worth it.

After five minutes of intense concentration, Kagome felt relaxed enough to open her eyes and smile at her companion.

"This is nice, isn't it, Sango-chan?" she chirped.

The taiji-ya was leaning against a rock, staring into the middle distance. Her mouth was closed and small, and her eyes heavy-lidded in an expression of vague resignation, a look Kagome had noticed on her features more and more often. It worried her.

"Sango-chan?"

The other girl visibly started and appeared to become aware of her surroundings. Blinking and coming back to earth, she gave Kagome a small, half-smile. "What? Oh, yes. Yes it is nice," she replied, and then the smile was gone, like a small, skittering thing darting across a rock, and her eyes began to look somewhere far away again.

Kagome felt her own mouth twist a little. Well, sometimes it was something with Sango, too. "Is something wrong?" she asked quietly. "Is it trouble with Miroku-sama?"

There was a flash of annoyance in Sango's eyes, and Kagome felt immediately chastised even though it was gone in an instant. "No," Sango shook her head, and Kagome noted her long brown hair, damp and clinging to her skin, sweep through the water at the motion, "it's, um... the scar. On my back." She looked slightly embarrassed. "It's acting up."

Kagome frowned unable to understand. "Acting up?" she repeated.

Sango nodded. "It pulls at the rest of my back. It's uncomfortable, sometimes." She shifted her eyes so she was looking directly at Kagome. "It's uncomfortable when I remember it," she said.

Kagome felt her frown melt into a smile. "Well," she sighed. "I have a really nice salve that should take care of that problem! I use it on my own scar - " her fingers brushed the shiny star burst of skin on her left side "- and it fixes it up a treat! I have some in my backpack if you -"

But Sango was shaking her head. "No thanks, Kagome-chan," she interrupted.

Confused, Kagome tilted her head. "But if your scar is bothering you, you should take care of it."

In the rising steam, Sango slumped further into the water. "No thanks," she repeated. "I'll be all right."

Then Sango closed her eyes and slipped down beneath the surface, leaving only her floating hair and a few bubbles to mark her place, and it slowly dawned on Kagome that Sango wasn't really talking about the scar at all.

Even though the demon huntress was only a few feet away, beneath the water, she was in a place she could not articulate, and where Kagome could not go.

No one, save one person, could touch her there, and Kagome, standing helplessly on the border, could do nothing.

After almost a minute of blowing bubbles, Sango resurfaced, gasping for air, and then turned to her companion with a bright smile that almost hid the things behind her shadowed eyes. "Do you have any of that soap for hair, Kagome-chan?" she asked sweetly. "My hair still has grime in it, and it's really bothering me."

Mutely, Kagome handed the shampoo to her, and watched as Sango worked it into her scalp. She did it slowly and surely, covering the entire length with lather, and then, with deliberate care, Sango washed it all away.

* * *

After a fairly fruitless shopping trip, Kagome wheeled cheerfully through the front door on Friday, determined to be normal despite the fact that the demon in her living room bent her around and made her act anything but normal. She kicked off her shoes and walked straight past Sesshoumaru who reclined regally against the sofa from his position on the floor and threw herself against the cushions, feet sticking straight out in front of her with toes spread, airing herself out after her slightly stressful day. "Oooooh," she moaned rapturously. "I should have never bought those shoes."

In the background, the television chattered, and Sesshoumaru didn't reply. When she lifted her head to see him fully she found him looking at her askance. "What?" she demanded.

He looked back to the television, displaying the news. "You deliberately wear shoes that cause discomfort?" he said, and Kagome imagined his tone sounded incredulous.

"Well," she waved a hand airily, "they're really cute. So I wanted to wear them when I went out to shop."

If he had been a being inclined toward gesture, she fancied he would have raised an eyebrow high. "Cute," he said flatly.

"Yes, cute," she huffily replied. "I think they make me look good."

"Hm," he responded, apparently dragged back into the program. Kagome wondered if he was actually paying attention to the television, or if he saw it as some sort of opportunity to space out and meditate. It was impossible to tell.

"Have you been watching television all day?" she asked.

He inclined his head, shrugging.

"You should go outside and get some fresh air," she told him in her best 'mother' voice. It seemed like a good thing to say, although why he would need anything like fresh air was beyond her. He probably didn't even need to breathe, now that she thought about it.

Sesshoumaru sighed, the sound holding an edge to it that was half-exasperation, half-world weariness. "The air is too putrid," he informed her. "I cannot abide it for very long."

Kagome wanted to smack her forehead. "Oh," she said, feeling stupid. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Unsurprising," he replied, though his voice held no malice. "You cannot smell it as I can."

"Inuyasha never really seemed to have a problem with it," she said, which was the only thing she could think to say.

Sesshoumaru did not respond to that.

"Hey, wait," Kagome piped up, a thought striking her. "You never reacted badly to smells back then in the past. You'd just waltz right through them and do your fighting."

He gave her a look. "Waltz?" he said. His voice gave the word a warm tone, as though he were amused.

"Well. You know. Figure of speech," she mumbled glancing at her hands. "And that doesn't answer my question."

"You did not ask one," he told her, "but just because I am able to endure them for the span of time required to accomplish a goal does not mean I enjoy subjecting myself to them."

Kagome laughed, secretly pleased that he seemed to be speaking to her more, answering her inquiries instead of just staring at her with that penetrating glare. He still looked at her with intensity, but at least the glances were coupled with words, so that she didn't feel quite so uncomfortable.

Absentmindedly, Kagome bent her knee and brought her foot up to her knee and began to massage it while devoting half her attention to the television, and half her attention to the silent demon on her living room floor.

He was sitting seiza and wearing a kimono and hakama, long silver hair flowing down his back to pool over his bare toes. Irrationally, Kagome wondered what it would feel like to have that hair on her own tired, sore feet, but almost immediately blushed and dismissed the notion as a desire too weird to even consider. Embarrassed at her own thoughts, she shifted her gaze from his hair to his thighs, hard and bowed with muscle beneath the thick layers of fabric. Finding those equally strange and distracting, Kagome gave up and stared fixedly at the television set.

The market was doing well today. Not that economics particularly interested her, but it was something to focus on, so she continued to massage as the anchor listed a number of stocks and indexes.

Her feet were really sore, she realized distantly. A small noise surfaced in her throat as she dug the joint of her thumbs into a particularly tender spot below the ball of her foot. "Oooh," she mumbled.

And then Sesshoumaru was in front of her, deftly picking her foot out of her hands and bringing it down in front of him. "Stop," he said. "You will hurt yourself."

One hand cradled her foot, the other looped loosely around her ankle, causing her to shiver through her shock. "What - ?" she stumbled over her own tongue, all her well-ordered thoughts in a jumble. "What...?"

"Be still," he ordered, and pressed down against her arch with a thumb, and the feel of skin on a rarely touched place sent a slow, spreading warmth through her entire leg, shooting up through her calf and over the inside of her thigh to curl low in her belly.

Kagome twitched. "Um," she breathed, brain fighting for coherency.

Soft amber eyes locked with hers. "Be still," he murmured again. "This is difficult."

Deftly, Sesshoumaru smoothed out the kinks in her foot with swift smooth strokes before delicately taking the other in hand and doing the same. All the while Kagome burned, embarrassed and flustered, and tried not to wiggle too much, not daring to break his stare.

He was finished in less than a minute, moving her feet gently from his warm lap and to the floor. "Now you may move," he informed her, settling back and turning his face away, and Kagome let out a rush of air that she hadn't even been aware of trapping behind her teeth.

Where before she had been comfortable and at ease, the world had tilted sideways and she was reeling to keep up with the movement. She had no idea what to think about what had just happened. Her blood was running hot and cold, and Kagome wished she could wind back the ribbons of time that had come unfurled. If she could rewind to a week ago, a day ago, just a minute ago, she would be all right. "Um," she said again, searching for something to say. "Thank you?"

"Do not mention it," he dismissed her. "Humans are frail. They need care."

How would you know? she wanted to ask. A long time ago - it seemed like a lifetime now - she would have taken issue with his tone, but it occurred to her that he was opaque, full of odd, angular reasons for his actions that she might not ever see. He was icy and guarded, obscured, and the places he went she couldn't even imagine. She imagined him driving humans before him in his youth, observing frailty, caring for a little girl with bruised feet who died anyway.

Though she could still feel the imprint of his fingers on her skin, Kagome tucked her own feet beneath her body, and tried not to think about the man only two feet away. When she went to bed that night, she tossed and turned, stared at the ceiling, and counted sheep, and still she imagined him kneeling at her feet, kneeling between her legs, cresting and crashing against her

like a wave. Silver hair and golden eyes and just good enough for her to want him. She felt dirty, knowing she wanted him, knowing that desire was a betrayal.

Kagome turned over, buried her face in her pillow, and moaned, frustrated with herself and her own stupid reactions to him, and with him as well. She could feel the past, their shared history growing and wrapping around them and binding her to him. He reminded her of so much, of so many others, that she just wanted to devour him and keep him with her.

In her mind, she wrapped him up and swallowed him whole, and when she dreamed, he tangled claws in her hair and blurred, in and out, himself and everyone else all at once.

* * *

"Cigarettes," Sesshoumaru said by way of non-sequitur greeting when Kagome walked into the kitchen the next morning, fully dressed and fresh from the shower. She'd thought about sitting around in her dressing gown like she always did on Saturday mornings and Sesshoumaru be damned, but the thought of sitting around scantily clad with his heavy eyes resting on her skin made her pause, flush, and decide to get dressed before drinking her coffee. She looked bright and chipper when she paced across the linoleum floor, but was still half asleep and certain she had missed something.

"I beg your pardon?" she said, stopping in her tracks and blinking with confusion.

"And slacks and a button-up shirt," said the centuries-old demon. He said the words, clearly uncomfortable with them, but coolly and calmly as though he had been practicing.

Kagome blinked again. "Why cigarettes?" she asked him, still not certain she had properly comprehended what he was saying.

He shrugged, a real shrug this time.

Kagome sighed, frustrated. "Later today," she said. "I'll have to ask my mother for some money."

"They are not necessary yet," he told her. "There is no hurry."

"Oh, thanks," she said crankily, "good to know."

He just gave her his customary flat stare and Kagome threw her hands in the air and turned to her coffee maker, working on automatic and trying to clear her head. Filling the filter with ground beans and pouring the water in, Kagome slowly let her brain catch up with the world.

After a moment her brain seemed to be properly engaged, so Kagome switched on the coffee machine, turned in place, and propped a hand on her hip, looking hard at the demon.

"Do you want coffee?" she asked abruptly.

"No," he said. "A glass of water."

Pressing her lips together, Kagome nodded and retrieved a glass from the cupboard. With steady hands she filled it with cold water from the sink and walked over to him, holding it out in front of her. "Here," she said lightly.

Sesshoumaru extended a hand and closed his fingers over hers before sliding them down to the bottom of the glass and lifting it out of her grasp. Swallowing hard, she deliberately turned away from him and bustled as much as she could as she waited for the coffee to percolate and brew.

He was watching her, and with the feel of his fingers still on her own it was suddenly the last straw. In her mind she turned around and confronted what had been poking at her for the past week.

Kagome was not a stupid girl, but she couldn't understand what he was trying to do. Or rather, she couldn't understand why he was doing it.

Around her, she could feel Sesshoumaru weaving a trap and luring her in.

She was not practiced at the art of seduction, but she could recognize it when she saw it, and each sensual touch or heavy glance spoke volumes, though only now did she think she was beginning to see. He insinuated himself into her life. His every move seemed calculated to inspire a response in her, to manipulate her, to move her into the position he wanted, daring her to defy the pull of gravity. And she was falling into it.

For whatever end, he was drawing her to him, and she was following because she wanted to, but she didn't know why she wanted to.

Kagome hated not knowing her own mind, and she couldn't understand why she was letting him affect her the way he was. Maybe it had been too long since she'd felt wanted, or maybe he was just too beautiful to pass up, but for whatever reason she was letting him do it, and she could feel them circling around each other, falling together.

Outside, Kagome heard thunder rumble, so low she felt it vibrate her bones, and biting her lip she stretched up, arching her body and grabbing a mug from the top shelf, knowing he was looking. There was an inevitability somewhere along the line, and how far or how near it was appeared to depend on her.

Pouring out a stream of steaming coffee, Kagome lifted her mug and walked toward the table, intensely and embarrassingly aware of the sway of her hips, and sat down across from him.

"What did you mean, 'not necessary yet'?" she demanded, breaking her train of thought away from the issue that occupied her mind and refocusing on what was in front of her. "What are you planning to do?" She narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

He gave her a look that radiated wounded innocence and surprise. "You indicated I should go outside," he told her. "I gather my current attire is not... appropriate."

Kagome nodded and sipped her coffee. "All right," she said. "I'll try."

Sesshoumaru just inclined his head, in thanks or indifference, she couldn't tell.

Sighing, she looked down into the dark, steaming liquid in her mug and inhaled deeply, trying to shut him out, trying to earn a tiny moment of time for herself, but his presence filled the room, invaded the apartment, her life.

He hovered, blocking everything else out since she found him, making her spiral around him, distracted, nervous, on edge. He crept along the edges of her consciousness, crawled across her skin, made her pay attention.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Do?"

"Once you have clothes," she amended. "Are you going to leave?"

He was silent, as though thinking. "No," he finally said. "Not yet."

Kagome just nodded, suddenly scared he would break that promise, that suddenly she would wake up and he wouldn't be there the next day. She was suddenly glad of his all-invasive presence, suddenly wanted him to stay with her until she wasn't so frightened of the silence, of the absence of her friends, of the happy, uncomprehending faces of her family.

But he wouldn't leave. He was like Inuyasha, wanting something from her, staying with her until he got it. Kagome remembered the other, white hair, yellow eyes, red clothes, warm arms. She remembered everything, and the memories stung, like needles, in her heart.

Sesshoumaru shifted, once again centering her world around himself. "Miko," he said, voice low, "what are you thinking about?"

She stared at her reflection on the surface of the coffee, looking tired in the cheap yellow light of the kitchen, and outside the thunder rolled again. "The past," she told him.

"Mm," he said, dropping the low rumble of his throat into the silence, as though he wanted to see how she would respond to the sound. Kagome closed her eyes.

* * *

There once was a wandering monk.

Kagome liked Miroku almost from their first meeting. He was bright and insincere, always covering up an endless flying fall toward death with an easy smile and bright white teeth. Unlike Sango, his pain was hidden in the open, kept secret only by a dark glove and a rosary.

She woke up one night, before they met the taiji-ya, and noticed that he was still awake, staring at the moon.

"Miroku-sama?" she whispered.

He started and glanced down at her, his eyes wide and unguarded, and she saw him scared and young before he dropped his mask back into place and grinned at her. Putting his hands down, he scooted in her direction. Inuyasha was no where in sight, and Shippou was sleeping soundly in her back pack for some reason.

"What is wrong, Kagome-sama?" he said softly, kneeling by her side and looking down at her, and his warm gaze made her tingle in strange places, and she liked it and felt uncomfortable at the same time.

"I just wanted to know if you're okay," she told him, smiling, ignoring her body's insistence that he was sweet and kind and... cute.

"Of course I am, Kagome-sama," he replied. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know," she said. "You looked sad."

The monk smiled at her, a warm, bright look. "I am doing fine. But are you well?" Suddenly he slipped on the mask that was all concern and solicitous hands that wandered too far, taking the pleasure they could while he was still alive to enjoy it.

"I'm fine," she told him, scooting away from him slightly.

He looked hurt, and she couldn't tell whether the expression was genuine or fake, because it stayed too long to be genuine, but faded far quicker than those expressions that were false.

"I'm sorry, Miro - "

"Shh," he whispered, and then his fingers were on her lips, and she wondered if he was going to kiss her, give her the first kiss she'd ever had, and she knew they were standing on a dangerous precipice. It would be so easy to fall into it -

And then he smiled, somewhat sad, and moved away, leaving her to feel guilty and cheated, and so lonely she thought she would cry.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Chapter 2

Standing on a precipice again, Kagome thought of how much Sesshoumaru reminded her of the past, of the things she had lost, and thought she could explain him the same way. "Why do you stay here?" she wondered out loud, desperate to distract herself from the discomfort he was inspiring in her. "Is it because I remind you of her?"

"Of who?" Sesshoumaru wanted to know.

Kagome looked down at her hands, twisted up on themselves. "Rin. Do I remind you of her?"

His long fingers reached down and stilled her furious fumblings, her nervous cracking of her knuckles, and it felt so strange to have his skin against hers. Involuntarily she sucked air through her teeth, suddenly lightheaded.

"You remind me of no one," he said quietly, drawing his hand back, letting his palm slide over the backs of her fingers.

Kagome turned her face away so that he wouldn't see her shock. She closed her eyes and swallowed. "Ah," she replied, mouth suddenly dry.

Sesshoumaru shifted in his seat.

"Miko," he said, the word sounding dark on his lips, "why did you awaken me?"

It was the first real question he'd posed, seemingly without agenda, genuine and true, and suddenly she felt small and helpless, lost inside his gaze, lost inside her own body. She wondered if he was all in her imagination.

She thought of her friends who fluttered around her, did their silly things and left her standing alone after she had given them the help they wanted. She thought of Yoshi and his endless womanizing. She thought of Miroku, who had grinned to hide his fear, of Sango, who had spoken little but meant a lot, of Shippou who cuddled up to her at night, of Inuyasha who never knew what she wanted him to be. She thought of all the little things that never meant anything, and all the big things that meant less, and all the things she had lost and could never regain.

She wanted to think up some excuse. She opened her mouth, meaning to lie.

"I..." her breath caught. She tried again. "I... I was lonely."

The words hung in the air between them, and as soon as she had spoken she knew it was the truth.

Her eyelids fluttered, and high in her nose she felt the sting of tears.

She wasn't going to cry in front of him. "Excuse me," she said quickly and grabbed her dirty glass from in front of her, jumping up and whirling away from the weight of his gaze that made her feel so naked, but she could feel it sliding over her even as she walked away.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Staring down into the sink, Kagome rinsed the glass and tried to ignore the demon sitting at the table and watching her. He made her squirm uncomfortably, made her cold and hot and nervous. For the hundredth time since she had led him down the mountainside, in the deep and silent part of her mind that she hardly let herself examine, she wished that she had left him there to grow old beneath a layer of dust and time.

He was poor company, all silent stares and cryptic thoughts and strange touches that she didn't understand but wished for anyway, and he only compounded her desire for the past rather than quenching it. All the people she had loved or hated had died, leaving all her pained fury and stunted friendships and strangled love flapping free and unfinished behind her.. Now, the only one who remained stayed obscured and wrapped in enigma, and she didn't know whether to love or hate or pity him.

Truth be told, she had never known what to feel about him. He'd been cruel and ruthless, someone to fear or despise, and then there was a little girl, and a sword that healed, and tiny things that didn't make sense in her own home, like the way he looked at her with shadows and hunger on his face, like she reminded him of something he wanted.

He didn't fit into the world the way she wanted him to. She didn't have the people she wanted with her, wasn't doing what she wanted, and nothing was the way she wanted, except that he was there, keeping her sane or driving her crazy and she couldn't tell which.

Sighing, she pressed a damp hand to her forehead, trying to shut out the things in her skull that she didn't want to know.

Even now his eyes were on her, heavy and intense, and she wondered if he liked what he saw. In her back, she felt her muscles contract a little. Her body felt heavy and strange.

She just... she wanted...

Slowly, Kagome ran a finger around the inside of the glass, slick and wet from cleaning, and licked her lips, wanting.

Her breath caught in her throat as she heard him rise from the table in a rustle of light fabric.

She kept her eyes straight forward, felt her breath come in shallow, silent pants, and she stared at the tarnished chrome of the faucet.

He was behind her.

"Miko," he said, voice low and slightly ragged around the edges. Kagome closed her eyes.

Then his hands were on her waist, pulling her backward into his body, one snaking up to cup her breast and the other sliding down to the space between her legs, fingers curling there and pressing down gently. Kagome whimpered in shock and sudden revelation. On her neck, his breath brushed across her skin as Sesshoumaru placed burning lips against her throat, swirled his tongue over her pulse.

For them, in that moment, time lay down and was still.

Inevitable. Fate. They had been an accident waiting to happen, and now that the universe had funneled down to the point of impact, Kagome didn't care. Desire pooled between her legs where his long fingers moved in sweet friction, shooting out across her like white hot blades.

His body was like a furnace, heat seeping through the layers of clothing that separated them. She felt his erection, hard and pressing, seeking her, desiring her, wanting her.

Her mouth went dry.

" - oh - " she whispered.

The glass tumbled from heavy, limp fingers and shattered on the floor.

Her bones had turned to water, and only his arms around her like iron bands kept her from sinking to the ground.

"Um," she breathed, head falling back to rest on his shoulder. She felt a fang run up her throat.

Bad idea, bad idea, she chanted in her mind, trying to be sensible. His palm against her nipple, rubbing the rough fabric of her clothes over raw nerves, caused her to arch, hard, straight into him. She was in a fog, unable to see. Bad idea, bad idea, oh god oh god, bad idea bad bad bad -

"Kagome," Sesshoumaru rumbled against her ear, and she was lost.

Then she was facing him, propped up on the counter and head against the cupboards, and his hands were parting her legs as he bent his mouth to the swell of her breasts. He was breathing hard, panting against her flesh, and her own fingers were fumbling greedily at the obi at his waist.

Too many clothes, she thought muzzily. Impatiently she parted the kimono, wanting to feel him against her, and where her fingertips met his chest he burned. He was scalding hot, so hot, so good, and she slid her hands up to his shoulders and shoved the fabric away, revealing searing satin skin stretched over muscles of steel.

He was frantically working at the buttons on her blouse, his mouth devouring the flesh beneath as he parted the cloth, and as cool air hit her fevered body she shivered beneath him, dragging fingers over his exposed chest, feeling his muscles jump and quiver beneath heated skin.

The bra presented an obstacle.

Sesshoumaru growled - low, feral - and at the dark angry sound quaking through her bones, Kagome moaned, feeling her thighs grow slick. She wanted to squeeze her legs together, press her own hands to herself, relieve some of the suddenly building pressure. Desperately she raked her fingernails down Sesshoumaru's stomach. With deep, drugged satisfaction she noted that he jerked convulsively beneath the sharp strokes, hips thrusting forward of their own accord. She liked it so much that she did it again. He made a strangled noise in his throat that

sent a stab of need straight through her core, and his back bowed so violently that his erection, covered in heavy fabric, brushed against her.

Suddenly Kagome wasn't satisfied at all. He was so hard...

"More," she mumbled as his measured, eager claws unhooked her bra and scraped lightly down the hypersensitive skin of her stomach. She felt his lips move, smiling against the underside of her breast, and to her infinite dismay he deliberately moved back, just a little.

Kagome groaned. "No." She needed friction there. She was so achingly empty. Desperately she pulled at the tie at his waist, loosening it, tossing it aside, and he was in her palm, burning velvet over iron.

"Please." Gently, she squeezed, running her thumb over the soft head, spreading the moisture gathered at the tip, and in her arms Sesshoumaru made a noise of pure want, and his hips bucked against her hand.

She felt long fingers fumbling beneath her skirt, brushing against the dampness between her legs, and she cried out softly as he hooked her panties with one hand and lifted her into the air with the other. She struggled, divesting herself of the flimsy offending garment, and then he was kissing her, parting her lips with his own, rough liquid tongue delving inside, tasting her in their first kiss even as the head of his erection nudged her slick folds.

Crazy. She was going crazy, mindless, eyes rolling. Her hands stroked his shaft, and he groaned into her mouth. The blood in her ears nearly drowned out her own muffled cries, and then he was parting her, moving forward, filling her up in a slow, aching spread.

Kagome broke the kiss, gasping as he buried his face in the crook of her neck, and she groaned helplessly as he slid inside, stretching her out, filling her to the brim. Her hands fastened in his hair, fingers curling, and over her legs the heavy open kimono glided, drawing her into his clothing as she drew him into her body. Roughly she dragged his mouth back to hers and kissed him hard, running her tongue over his, feeling the points of his fangs, tasting him even as he invaded her body in a slow, silken slide.

He was trembling beneath her hands, or she was trembling. She couldn't tell any longer, and she took a shuddering breath, tried to press her entire body to his. The muscles of his neck worked in a hard swallow, and he shifted slightly.

The spiraling pleasure turned dark and bright as he angled himself against her. Breath dampened her cheek, and flames licked up her body, all-consuming.

This is what it feels to stand in fire, she thought dimly, eyes drooping, and not be burned. This is so wrong, this isn't right, this isn't what I want -

Except that it was. She wanted it so badly, wanted to reach through him, draw his heart out and crawl inside it. She remembered him. She knew him.

She wanted him, and for some reason he wanted her back. It was enough, in that bright, eternal moment, just to know that.

And then he was fully inside, resting against her, and she was dying. Kagome opened her eyes - when had she closed them? - and looked into Sesshoumaru's face, at the slightly jagged stripes on his cheeks, at the lowered eyelids, at the drugged amber eyes that softened and focused and devoured her.

Staring into her eyes, gaze tugging at her soul, he pulled out swiftly, and then thrust inside, hard and deep.

Kagome cried out, feeling his hard length, drawing his soft lower lip into her mouth and biting gently. He thrust again, and then again, and again, picking up a quick, gliding rhythm.

She closed around him, clenched around him like a fist, drawing him in as he moved inside her, hard and angry and filled with longing, over and over, driving away the emptiness, illuminating the shadows with incandescent need. The sick, strange darkness inside her burned away beneath his movements, beneath his fingers and mouth and eyes and he stroked her until she cried out and came hard, toes curling, opening before him. Pleasure spiraled through her limbs and she collapsed backward as he lowered his mouth to her breasts and consumed her whole.

And he didn't stop but kept going, kept plumbing her body, drawing out her pleasure as it became so intense it was almost pain, making her sob into his neck until he grunted in the back of his throat and spilled into her, and his entire frame jerked and shuddered beneath the impact of his orgasm.

Time restarted.

Outside it had begun to rain, and slowly Kagome realized the world had changed.

He was still inside her, brow to her shoulder as their breathing slowed, and she suddenly felt very, very stupid.

"Um," she said.

Sesshoumaru, hair in a mess, clothing akimbo, lifted his face from the crook of her neck and snaked his arms down and around beneath her hips and picked her up, keeping her molded to his body.

"Eep!" she squeaked, falling against his shoulders and finding herself with a good view of the kitchen as he moved her to the edge of the living room. With little ceremony, he slid out and deposited her on the carpet.

Kagome suddenly found whole new reserves of shame and looked away from him so she wouldn't... well, see something embarrassing. Her legs were wobbly, and there was a slick stickiness working its way down the inside of her thigh. Dimly, she was wondering where her underwear had gone when her eyes fell on the kitchen floor.

"Oh my god!" she said suddenly, crazily distracted. "You're bleeding!"

Sesshoumaru just snorted, contorted his body quickly, and plucked something from his sole, and it took Kagome a moment to realize that it was glass from the one she dropped.

Semen dripping down the inside of her leg and trembling from aftershocks, Kagome suddenly wanted to forget what had just happened, wanted to forget the fact that she had just fucked Sesshoumaru in her tiny kitchen. "Let me get something to bandage that," she said, sounding inane to her own ears.

"No need," he said. "It's already healed." He gave her a cool look, as though he had never dragged his skin against hers, as though they were suddenly back to where they started. "I will clean it up," he told her.

"You don't need - " she started to say.

He pinned her with his eyes again. "You should clean up as well, miko. Before you make a mess."

Kagome's face burned, and she fled.

* * *

There once was a hanyou.

"How many days?" Inuyasha screeched, baring his teeth in an angry feral grin. Kagome shifted uncomfortably at the sight of sharp fangs in his otherwise human mouth, but tried not to show how much it bothered her - it would be rude.

"Only two!" she said. "I have to go back today and take an exam tomorrow! I'll be back tomorrow night or at the latest the morning of the day after." Her hands tightened around the straps of her backpack in defiance, and she felt her chin lift of its own accord. She was so sick of Inuyasha trying to push her around, and she really did have an English exam to take.

Inuyasha didn't seem to be buying it. "How can you think of going back when we still have so much work to do!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. "It's your fault the jewel was shattered, and I'm sick of waiting around for it!"

Kagome huffed and tried to size up the situation. Inuyasha was standing directly between herself and the well with his arms crossed and his sword at his hip. Not that she thought he would use the sword on her - wasn't it meant to protect humans rather than kill them? it was doubtful the thing would even transform - but there were barbed claws on the ends of those hands.

She didn't really want to use that word. It was too much power, too new, too cruel to use on him. She had no doubt that he might try to hurt her, but she wasn't a violent girl. She feared that if she used the word too often she would get used to it.

She cocked a hip and tried to find the words to placate him.

Clasping her hands in front of her face, she begged him. "Inuyasha, please?"

"No!" he shouted. "You can't! You need to be here!"

Kagome lost the tenuous grasp she had on her temper. "Inuyasha, OSUWARI!" she shrieked.

The boy went crashing to the ground even as she ran past him. "Don't follow me!" she commanded. "I have to do this, so just leave me alone!" Blood boiling, she placed a hand on the edge of the well and vaulted over, falling into the endless stream of time as Inuyasha's curses faded behind her.

"Stupid Inuyasha," she muttered to cover up the guilt of having to subdue him.

Gently she was laid to rest at the bottom of the well, and Kagome sighed and began the annoying climb to the top again. Each step upward seemed to remove a little of the stress on her heart, and when she finally crested the top of the well she inhaled deeply, happy to finally be home.

Home. She hadn't known how much she valued it until she thought she could never return, hadn't really known how scared she was in the past until she was home in the present again. With a contented sigh Kagome crossed the small courtyard and entered her family home, removing her shoes as soon as she entered the door. It was such a relief to take them off, to shake the dust from her feet and go somewhere where the past couldn't touch her.

"Mama! Jii-chan! Souta! I'm home!" she called out, sliding the door open and stepping into the living room. Her mother stuck her head out of the kitchen.

"Kagome!" she exclaimed. "We didn't know you were coming home. I thought your test wasn't until tomorrow?"

Kagome shook her head. "Sorry, Mama, but I needed to come home. Inuyasha was driving me crazy and I need a good night's sleep."

Her mother gave her a bright smile. "That's okay," she said sweetly. "You don't have to apologize, we like it when you come home. Dinner's ready anyway."

"Oden?" Kagome chirped.

Her mother laughed. "Sorry, only curry tonight."

Kagome shrugged as she walked into the kitchen. "After being in the Sengoku Jidai, I'm not picky," she announced. Her grandfather smiled and Souta piped a greeting as she tossed her backpack to the side and ruffled Souta's hair.

"Hey!" he protested.

"You like it," she teased. "Take it like a man."

Her little brother stuck out his lower lip and sat up straighter, endeavoring to be more grown up. With a twinge, Kagome realized she hadn't seen him in almost a week. She shoved the feeling away and sat down at the table, folding her legs beneath her while her mother bustled around and brought out an extra bowl and spoon.

Setting the dishes down in front of her daughter, Kagome's mother smiled sweetly as she settled into her seat at the table. "Now," she said kindly, "tell us all about what you've been doing in the past!"

Kagome opened her mouth -

- and found she couldn't speak. There were no adequate words to describe what she had been experiencing. Fear? Excitement? Horror? Life-threatening situations? Severe annoyance at a certain hanyou? Kagome bit her lip, unable to articulate her feelings or experiences. They wouldn't understand the horror of being pawed at by a frog who wanted to devour your soul, or being buried underneath the poison of ruthless, heartless taiyoukai, or caught up in sharp, deadly hair. There was no way to impress upon them the world she knew.

There was nothing for it but to deflect the attention. Her mother always understood when she didn't want to talk, so she would help.

Kagome grinned. "I don't want to talk about that!" she blurted out, laughing a little to hide her sudden inability to communicate. "I want to hear about you guys! Souta, how are you doing in school?"

Her little brother blinked for a second before launching into a detailed account of how he and his friend Hiro had invented a new card game, and her grandfather interrupted to grill him on the rules. The familiar sound of their discussion flowed over Kagome, and in her neck she felt the tension of the past, of always being under attack, of having to deal with Inuyasha, unwind and melt away.

She stole a quick glance at her mother from the corner of her eye, expecting to see that knowing look on her face, so understanding of her reluctance and need to be normal.

But her mother was looking at her, an expression of incomprehension on her features, and Kagome suddenly felt at a loss.

Around her in the warmth of the kitchen, her family laughed and giggled and argued back and forth, but Kagome suddenly felt as though she had moved on beyond them, only able to look at them over her shoulder as they chattered on in their little lives, or as though she was staying still while they flowed past.

Looking down at her hands, she felt a high, stinging sensation in her nose, the harbinger of tears. I've been gone a week, she thought, and deep in her mind she felt both herself and her family shift and move around each other, suddenly no longer one, but two, and she didn't know how to fix it.

Kagome ate her curry, and felt the universe close over her head, like waves, shutting out the air.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

* * *

The water in the tub was so hot that sweat was dripping down from her hairline and covering the outer edges of her cheeks in angry, itchy tracks, but Kagome didn't care because the heat made her feel cleaner. Sitting in the middle of the tub, she was curled up, arms folded in the hollow between her stomach and her thighs, tender breasts touching the top of her legs, forehead resting on her knees. She had to lock her ankles around themselves to keep them from sliding across the slippery surface of the tub floor. Well aware that she was assuming an approximation of the fetal position, she stared into the dark cave made by the hollow of her body and tried to make her mind blank.

It was all in vain. Despite her efforts, her mind kept replaying, catching her up in an endless loop. Over and over, she remembered his body on hers, and each time she did her cheeks flamed anew and she let her face fall against the hard bones of her knees. Each time she thought of him, the way the skin of his hips slid against the insides of her thighs, the way his chest brushed, hard and hot against her own, the way his stomach clenched beneath her fingers, she flared again with shame and desire. She was a pervert, she thought. No sooner had she finished fucking him - she felt slightly dirty even thinking that word, but that was what it was - and she wanted to do it again. She was a degenerate. She should have never done it in the first place.

But, oh, he had felt so amazing, his tongue against hers...

After about ten minutes in the nearly scalding water, Kagome finally unfurled, letting her legs stretch out and moving to the back of the tub. Slowly she opened her legs and brushed her hands over herself, feeling oddly detached from her own body, even when she felt her finger catch a fold of still-hypersensitive skin and her back bowed in a slight convulsion from the sensation. In the back of her throat, she made a small, strangled noise.

It was so strange to think about herself this way; as though her body had been dormant, she was suddenly painfully awake, full of awareness and frightening sensual knowledge. It had been years since she had thought of herself in a sexual context; Kagome had been in the final months of college when she had lost her virginity, and hadn't felt any sort of need since then, until Sesshoumaru had opened his eyes and awoken in her life, and the knowledge of him and herself burned bright across her mind. Shifting in the water, she bit her lip, feeling strange and alien inside this new body.

Long fingers tipped in claws now blotted out her first fumbling memory of sex. Yoshi. It was so strange that she never thought of it now, but then she had thought she loved him, and when they had broken up only a week after their clothed, three minute encounter, she couldn't tear her mind from it. But now it was just a memory, eclipsed by golden eyes and pale skin, faded in the heat of immolation.

Fingers still crowded at the apex of her thighs, Kagome pressed down and felt a soft shudder of pleasure echo through the backs of her legs. Lightly, she scraped her fingernails over the

sensitive skin, feeling the water-resistant slickness of arousal and semen still collected inside her, and her cheeks flared with another touch of shame at the evidence of their transgression.

Taking a deep breath, Kagome dipped finger inside, and felt her body react. Immediately she withdrew.

Biting her lip, emotional discomfort excruciating, she reached for a washcloth and began to sponge away the evidence, steadfastly ignoring the tingling sensations her own ministrations inspired.

By the time she was done, her body had calmed itself enough for her to focus on washing the rest of her and, uncomfortably hot, she let a little cool water run into the tub and splashed it over her face, trying to get clean and wash away the slight sheen of sweat that had accumulated during and after the encounter. Deftly and vigorously she scrubbed her skin clean, nearly taking a layer off when she could.

When she was done she stepped out of the tub, toweled away the moisture still clinging to her skin, and decided firmly that she was going to go home. She needed the money, but most of all she needed to feel normal. Really normal, not the false sort of normal she had tried to achieve with Sesshoumaru - and look where that had landed her - but like she could talk to someone and they would listen and understand.

She would pretend that Sesshoumaru was just a man, and that she was having man problems. No one would ever have to know who he really was. She would laugh with Souta. Grandpa would smile, old and senile, and tell her a story. And she would ask her mother's advice, and then her mother would hug her and hold her and make her feel safe again, all right again, mold her back to herself.

At least, that was the plan.

Screw it, she thought. I want my Mama.

Kagome heaved herself out of the tub and hit the plug, letting the water drain out as she grabbed her towel from the towel rack and dried her skin, avoiding her own eyes in the mirror. Grabbing her blouse - it was still presentable - and a clean skirt and underwear, Kagome dressed quickly and headed to the door.

Where she paused.

He would be out there.

In her mind, he was still standing in her kitchen, disheveled and beautiful, kimono gaping open, but he couldn't still be there. He would have mopped up the blood - god, the blood - from the floor, tied the obi, would have smoothed his clawed hands - hot, frantic, fumbling clawed hands - through his silky hair. He might be at the table, or on the living room floor, or on the sofa, or he might have left -

He got what he wanted, she thought, and now he might be gone.

Kagome opened the door.

Sesshoumaru was sitting peacefully against the side of the sofa, arms folded into his sleeves, eyes closed. She was glad. She suddenly didn't want him to see her, suddenly wanting nothing more than to erase nearly everything she had done since he had woken up. He didn't move an inch as she edged around him.

"I'm going out," she choked, face burning, staring at the floor.

He was silent and still as she ducked out the door.

Once outside in the drizzling rain, Kagome took a slight breath, trying to calm her nerves. Stupid, she chided herself mentally. Stupid. She wasn't entirely certain as to why she was stupid, but she certainly felt the part. She had many reasons, of course, so in the end it probably didn't matter whether it was because she was regretting her actions, wishing to repeat her actions, or merely concerned that she would never be able to look him in the eyes - heavy, soft, honeyed eyes - again; it just mattered that she was the biggest idiot to walk the face of the earth.

Her mouth still tasted like his tongue.

Kagome sat down in her car in a flood of desire, rammed the vehicle into gear, and fled.

* * *

The courtyard was warm and wet and beautiful - the perfect holy shrine - and Kagome felt her entire body melting into the warm air and the cool shadows of the trees as she passed over the stones. Her shoes moved grittily on the ground, which now had damp dust and detritus from the streets strewn about since her grandfather was getting a little too old to do the sweeping every day.

Souta is probably supposed to do it, she thought to herself with a small smile, but I bet he's busy with his job. Souta had opted not to go to any further schooling and instead work full-time, and he was most likely tired when he arrived home. Kagome idly wondered how often her mother snuck downstairs and did his chores for him when he fell asleep at the dinner table, or dozed in front of the television, and felt a pang of longing for home hit her.

The trees and foliage were a brilliant green against the light grey of the sky and the blackened grey of the stones, and slowly she came to a complete stop in the middle of the courtyard and stared at the house.

I could stay here, in my old room, she thought. I could stay here, and Sesshoumaru could stay at my apartment until he's ready to leave! That might work...

She started to walk again, letting her mind clear and taking her worries, folding them up, and storing them away, into a crevice in her mind. She was home, and she wasn't going to show her family a troubled face.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Kagome walked in the front door and felt like she had returned from the past again, to find everything so surreally normal and perfectly in place. Shaking herself, she opened her mouth. "Mama!" she called out.

Off to her right, there was a rustling sound, and her mother leaned out of the kitchen door, looking surprised. "Kagome!" she said, sounding delighted. "I wasn't expecting you! Come in, come in! I'm making onigiri."

Kagome removed her shoes and stepped inside, feeling the comfort of the hardwood floor beneath her feet. It always felt so solid beneath her. "Sorry," she said automatically, padding into the kitchen, "but I just needed to pop by for a bit. I just forgot to call, I guess."

Her mother gave her a knowing smile, the one that had made her feel so safe once upon a time. "Are you getting enough sleep, dear?" she asked as she moved to the sink to run her hands beneath the water from the faucet. "How are you doing? How is school?"

Questions, questions, and how to answer? Kagome bought herself some time as she moved to the table and took a seat.

"Oh, don't sit down just yet!" her mother cried. Confused she stood again, only to be subjected to a warm hug that smelled of flowers.

"Sorry," she said, mentally scolding herself for not hugging her mother when she immediately came in. "Sorry, Mama."

"Nothing to worry about!" her mother sang, pulling away. "You seem tired! Have you been eating well?"

Kagome pounced on the subject. "Yes, I have. I had steak a few days ago," she half-lied. Well, I cooked steak a few days ago. I think that counts.

Her mother, already piling rice in her hand, turned and pinned her only daughter with a glare. "Steak?" she demanded. "What are you talking about? Do you need money? Have you spent it all? You know if you need any you just have to ask!"

Kagome watched as her mother absent-mindedly shaped a little triangle of rice in her hands, and in the hallway she could hear a clock ticking.

"Let's not talk about that now," she said quietly. "Where are grandpa and Souta?"

"Oh!" Her mother waved a hand, flinging rice across the counter top.

The counter top. Kagome had to suppress the brief vision of herself and Sesshoumaru rutting on its surface, and she dipped her head and let her hair fall over her flushed face as her mother replied. "Souta's out with friends, and Grandpa is at his chess club!"

Pressing a cooling hand to her cheek, Kagome grabbed the passing lifeline of conversation. "Grandpa plays chess?" she said, somewhat dumbfounded. "I didn't know that."

"Well," her mother said sweetly, "he doesn't really play chess. He's better at telling other people how to play."

Kagome blinked. "So... he teaches chess?"

A laugh escaped from her mother. "Not exactly," she giggled, dipping her hands into some water and scooping up more rice.

A little shot of annoyance surfaced. "He sits behind other people and tells them what move to make next," Kagome said flatly.

Her mother just nodded and laughed. "They're all old men," she said, "so they tend to do that to other people."

"Ah, yes," Kagome replied, well aware of the way her grandfather always tried to tell her what was best to do, even though he had little to no experience in the things for which she needed help. She missed him. Why couldn't he be here?

Her mother set another perfectly formed rice ball on the plate. "So what brings you here, Kagome?" her mother questioned, gently.

"I need money," Kagome said quickly, because it was true.

Her mother gave her a look over her shoulder. "And..." she prompted, plumping the rice in her hands.

Clenching her teeth, Kagome looked down at her clasped hands and was quiet. She reflected that Sesshoumaru might be rubbing off on her, and then scolded her brain for the poor choice of words as her cheeks flared again.

This table, she thought, is really very interesting.

"Kagome?"

And I am not at all going to think about Sesshoumaru. At all.

"Kagome?"

Kagome looked up, wishing she didn't show her shame so clearly on her face. "Yes?"

There was a smile across her mother's face, smug and knowing, as though she had peered inside her daughter's skull and seen the memories living there. A soft, loving hand was on her shoulder, the thumb slowly massaging the knotted muscles beneath her skin. "Is it boy problems?"

Kagome looked away. "Sort of," she said, because the last thing she thought of when she thought of 'boy problems' was her particular situation.

To her surprise, her mother gave a sigh of what seemed to be relief. "Ah," she breathed as she sat down across from her daughter. "I'm... glad."

Kagome blinked. "What?" she asked. "You're glad I'm having - er, boy problems?"

Her mother nodded as she touched Kagome's clasped hands. "I'm glad," she said softly, "that you seem to be finally moving past Inuyasha."

Kagome opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

"I know, I know," her mother said softly, "you loved him. But we both know that he's in the past."

Dead of infection, Kagome thought distantly, and she wanted to scream.

"And you can't live in the past your whole life, you know. It's difficult enough to live in the present, with the people that are around us now."

Platitudes. Little, silly clich&#65533;s that were just so wrong. Tell me something, mama, Kagome thought. Tell me something real and true, like you used to tell me.

"So... who is this boy?" her mother asked, looking soft and impenetrable all at once. Her mother's hands on her own felt strange and papery, as though the skin was thin and fragile compared to hers. Kagome blinked, and slowly, oddly, she realized her mother was growing old. But there was a question she had to answer, right?

This boy? she thought distantly, and the memory of Sesshoumaru's hot, questing mouth on the swell of her breasts flashed across her mind, clawed fingers skimming over her ribs and hips arching in to meet her own -

Snatching her hands back, Kagome shook her head violently. "He's no one," she said shrilly. "He's just this guy that I like!"

And her mother nodded sagely, as though she understood everything, the guilt and the shame and the need and the loneliness and the strange, irrational gratitude that made her want to run home and kiss Sesshoumaru up and down, and at the same time seal him away so they would never touch again. "I see," her mother said, "I see. You like him, but he doesn't like you, correct?"

"That is probably true," Kagome replied. Yes. She was painfully aware of how true it might be.

Her mother nodded knowingly. "Well, Kagome," she said gently, as though reading from a script, "you are a very special, sweet girl. If he doesn't see how worthy you are, then he is not worthy of you." Her mother grabbed her hands again and held them tight. "Just be who you are, and the right boy will find you."

Wearily, Kagome closed her eyes and nodded, suddenly wishing that she had never come, that she had just stayed at her flat and pretended nothing had changed. To Sesshoumaru, that was probably true - he had wanted her and she had wanted him, so they had fucked and that was that. Nothing would change between them, with the exception of everything. Something had happened in her little bleached white life, her tiny orderly home and her tiny orderly mind, and now she didn't know how to put it back the way it had been.

Her mother was still talking, still telling her that she would find the right boy someday, that he would sweep her off her feet and she would know from the moment he walked in the door that they were meant to be.

She nodded and smiled and thanked her mother for the advice. As she rose from the table her mother pressed a wad of cash into her hands, urging her to buy something nice for herself. Kagome agreed, something nice would be nice, and she fled the shrine much in the same way as she had fled her apartment. With nowhere else to go, she headed back, back towards the disorder and chaos and the golden eyes and shining skin and silver hair and the guilt that pressed down on her so heavily she thought she would never be able to breathe again.

Pulling into the parking lot, Kagome took a deep breath and assured herself that she was going to be fine. "Just act like nothing happened," she told herself. "You can buy clothes for him tomorrow, and just act like things are normal until he leaves." Ignoring the clenching in her chest, Kagome ascended the stairs to her flat, and walked into the entryway.

Sesshoumaru was nowhere to be found inside the doorway.

Which, Kagome reflected, was unsurprising; he probably regretted his indiscretions this morning just as much as she did. Kicking off her shoes, she decided that things might not be as difficult as she had anticipated. If they both acted normally, they should be able to get through the awkward period easily.

Padding back to her bedroom door, she opened it and stepped inside.

Sesshoumaru was sitting on the edge of the bed with nothing on but a towel around his waist and the heavy, sopping weight of his hair piled loosely beneath another towel atop his head and dripping into his face. Tiny drying water droplets were drying on his skin and his head was bowed. He seemed to be fascinated by the claws that hung limply between his knees, or perhaps the floor was simply captivating. Kagome wanted to die of embarrassment.

"S-sorry," she stammered, backing out quickly and nearly slamming the door.

Staring at the wood, unable to cope, she decided to feed the cat.

After a very deliberate five minutes of selecting the right can of cat food, grabbing the correct plate, locating the can opener, and opening the cat food, Kagome heard her bedroom door open and felt Sesshoumaru walk into the room. She was uncomfortably aware that she was more sensitive to his youki than ever before, and could feel the small ebbing and cresting of it with his movements. Breathing in air as though it were courage, she turned to find him clad once more in kimono and loose hakama that made his hips look simply delicious -

Kagome decided she should probably die before she thought about him ever again. It was one thing to think about him when he was out of sight, but another thing entirely to think about him when he was right in front of her. She was just ogling him, as if she owned him, as if he were just a piece of meat. A pleasurable piece of meat, to be sure, but all the same...

Blinking in confusion, Kagome was suddenly shocked at herself. She didn't think this way, she didn't think about people as things. Something was wrong with her, and it was standing in this room, looking at her and heating her blood.

"That can never happen again," she blurted suddenly.

Sesshoumaru just looked at her, his expression icy and guarded.

She shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. "No offense to you, but it was just wrong and shouldn't happen again." She bit her lip. "Not that... you... would want to..." she added before he could cut her down for her presumption. What if she'd been bad at it? What if he was disgusted with her? His reactions to her had spoken very loudly that he'd liked it, but there was still the niggling doubt - what if he hadn't?

On the other hand, what did it matter? They weren't going to do it again, and that was final! She couldn't believe she was worried about what he was thinking of her. It wasn't like she valued his high and mighty opinion, even though he'd been inside her a scant few hours ago -

Kagome clenched her teeth tightly.

Sesshoumaru surprised her by speaking. "Scared, miko?" he said, mockingly.

She bristled. "I am not scared. Let's just forget about it, okay? It was wrong and we shouldn't do it again."

The demon made a noncommittal sound in his throat and glided across the carpet, very evenly, toward her. "And why was it wrong, miko?"

Clenching her fists, Kagome lifted her chin. "It just was," she informed him, praying he wouldn't come any nearer, sudden visions flashing across her brain - if he touched her, would she resist?

Sesshoumaru stopped only a half a foot away and stared down at her. He was silent for a long, long time, and Kagome grew more and more nervous beneath his heavy regard.

"Very well," he said finally. "Unless you wish it, there will be no repeat of this morning."

Momentary relief and disappointment flooded down, almost immediately displaced by uncomfortable confusion - did he want to have sex with her again? Did he care? Did he feel rejected, or relieved? Unless I wish it? she repeated in her mind. What does he mean?

She narrowed her eyes and studied his face, but Sesshoumaru, taiyoukai, Lord of the West, and some-time ruthless killer, gazed back at her, as pretty and as opaque as always, and still as a statue in her living room. Kagome turned her thoughts on their heads and wondered, If I touched him, would he resist?

And suddenly the fearless miko was too scared to try, and looked away, trying to find the strength to breathe in the suddenly thick, stifling atmosphere.

He was close, but not close enough, and Kagome fought the almost overwhelming urge to tangle her hands in his clothes and pull him against her, trail her tongue up his jaw, really taste him -

From the corner of her eye, she watched as in slow motion, Sesshoumaru reached across the void between them and caught a lock of her hair between his claws. Slowly, slowly, he slid it through his fingers and drew it across the space between them, linking them together, and she couldn't tear her eyes away from the delicate strands in his hand. Kagome swallowed hard as he brought it to his lips, knowing what those lips felt like on the tender swell of her breasts, on her neck, on her skin, how those lips felt on her own.

Sesshoumaru quirked the corner of his mouth upward.

"Still so wrong, miko?" he whispered, and her knees buckled.

Kagome steadied herself immediately against the half wall, refusing to fall against him. She opened her mouth and tried to tell him yes.

"I don't know," she replied instead.

Her hair fluttered from his hand. "I think you do," he murmured, and he turned away.

She was so ashamed, and so angry, and so hot all over, so suddenly aroused and needy. And so angry. "Don't," she said, surprisingly evenly through her teeth, considering how hard her heart was pounding, "manipulate me."

"Apologies," he said, moving to the small window and gazing out, letting the grey light of the sullen afternoon fall on his face. "It will not happen again."

Kagome debated skewering herself on one of the kitchen knives. "Apology accepted," she choked out around the desire that had gathered in her throat and made her voice husky and deep. On shaking legs she made a wide berth around him and escaped into the bedroom, shutting the door behind her.

Not bothering to lock the door she stumbled across the room to the small dresser and pulled out the top drawer, sticking her hand in the back and rummaging around, on the verge of tears, though in anger or in loss she couldn't say. When her fingers found what she was looking for, she closed her fist around it and pulled it out.

Clenched in her suddenly sweating fist was the rosary that had bound Inuyasha to her.

She didn't know what strange impulse had caused her to seek it out, but having it in her hands after so many years suddenly seemed both stupid and ridiculous. Why did she keep it, and why was it in her hands now?

She wanted to put it on. She wanted to rip it into little pieces, let the beads bounce unnoticed into the corners of the room, never to be retrieved, to be covered in dust and forgotten over

time. When a new tenant moved in, they would find the strange beads along the baseboard and throw them out, never knowing their value.

Outside her door, she knew Sesshoumaru floated through her living room, through her tiny world, beautiful and untouchable and sexy as hell. It was so wrong to want him the way she did. It had been wrong to give into him in the first place, and it was no less wrong now that the deed was done.

She wished he would knock on her door, come inside, kiss her sweetly and make love to her, block out all her loss and longing - she wanted that. She wished for it.

Kagome looped the rosary around her hand, as though she were sealing her own void. "I'm sorry, Inuyasha," she whispered, very softly. "I'm so sorry."

And Inuyasha said nothing, because he was dead.

* * *

She was still painfully awake when Sesshoumaru opened her door and stepped into her room in the middle of the night.

Kagome had been waiting for him, curled on her side and facing away from the door, watching the sky through her tiny window. She'd been thinking of him, replaying that morning over and over in her head, and the sound of him entering her room, entering her inner sanctum caused her skin to flush with embarrassment. Dimly, she wondered if he could smell the arousal between her thighs.

It didn't matter. Still awake, the sheets clutched in her fingers, Kagome moved beneath the covers very slightly, letting the cloth move on her naked body.

She didn't know how she knew he would come to her, but it was almost comforting to hear his soft footfalls against the carpet and the closing of the door behind him. She'd said it was wrong though. She'd wanted him to come, even though it was wrong.

"I know," she said around her dry tongue, "that you didn't just enter my room uninvited."

Her voice sounded full of annoyance and bravado, but she was certain he could hear the tremulous note beneath it all.

"All right," he said, quietly.

In the darkness of the room, she heard silken cloth whisper over silken cloth.

"I know you are not undressing," she said, voice strangling in her throat. Tell him to leave, her mind screamed at her, but her mouth wouldn't work.

"All right," he murmured again, mockingly comforting.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

The sound of clothing whispering over skin to rest on the floor met her ears. Goose bumps sprang up and down her arms, and she curled around herself just a little more.

The time between when he stepped out of his clothing - god, she wanted to turn and look at him, wanted to shove him out of her home for being so presumptuous - and when he slid across the bed was interminable. When she finally felt his weight settle heavily behind her she let out the breath she hadn't even known she was holding.

"I know you did not just get into bed with me, because I don't wish it."

He chuckled, and his voice felt like fingers dancing up her stomach. "All right," he whispered, and then his hands were snaking their way around her naked waist, pulling her back into the cradle of his body. She plucked ineffectually at his fingers.

"So you do not wish it," he said quietly as she settled back against him, the hard planes of his chest against her back, his nearly full erection pressed at the cleft of her legs. He felt like heated satin against her, and Kagome felt a curl of fire spiral outwards through her limbs.

"Do you still not wish it?" he asked, and against her stomach his hand splayed wide, hips arching inwards toward hers.

Tell him to leave. He's not who you're really looking for.

"This is wrong," she whispered.

Against her back, she felt rather than heard the rumble of his laugh. "Why is that?" he asked her. His breath brushed the tiny hairs on the back of her neck.

Kagome squirmed.

"The others - " she began.

"You loved them, yes?" he interrupted. On her side, just below her ribs, his hand danced and played, tracing shivery patterns into her skin. Kagome pressed her thighs together, trying to block out the sudden rush of heat, but that only made it worse. Impossibly ready, dying for completion, humiliatingly susceptible to him, she groaned and buried her burning face in her hands.

She struggled to think. "I still love them," she managed to choke out.

Claws skated up her belly to her breast, and he covered the soft mound there with the palm of his hand, pressing down, massaging ever so slightly. Ripples of lightning radiated out from where he touched her, ricocheting inside her skin, electrifying her, and against her backside she felt him harden further.

Gasping, she barely heard him. "But they are gone, and we are here," he murmured against her ear.

And then he was sliding strong, tapered fingers between her thighs, lifting her leg. His body curled around, under and beneath, pressing against her slick entrance, and then he was inside her, moving slowly. Kagome gasped, hot and needy, arching backwards as he held her to him and let his hungry mouth play on her throat. Hand splayed across her stomach, hips thrusting achingly slow, and then his body twisted, light and deft, and she cried out, no longer caring.

"Ah..." she breathed. How did this happen? In her veins, her blood pumped hard and fast, and she felt a fluttering between her legs where Sesshoumaru glided against her.

"Don't stop." Her hands were on his now, she could feel the hard, delicate bones beneath his satin skin, and together their fingers moved roughly over her breasts. Gently he plucked a nipple, and Kagome jerked against him.

Stars pinwheeled across her vision.

Their rhythm picked up, endless and long, time obliterated from her mind. They moved and sighed and Kagome sucked his fingertips. Hands moving down her body, Sesshoumaru moaned softly and pulled away, still moving inside her - she thought she could feel every inch of him, sliding through her body - and then he was pressing a hot, needy kiss between her shoulder blades, mouth open as though he was about to swallow her.

Her hand was on his thigh, feeling his muscles slide beneath his skin, and against the pillow she pressed her burning face, stuffing her other wrist into her mouth and biting down hard as soft lips and the tip of his nose and his silken hair brushed against her. His tongue, his teeth, his mouth worked their way up her spine, straight up the back and into her hair, sending shivers down to her toes.

"Sesshou-"

Over the shell of her ear, he flicked his tongue.

"-maru-"

What could she say? What did she want to say, other than his name, sliding against the insides of her mouth, tasting like something sweet and dark and forbidden? It was the first time she had said his name in years - before, her tongue had tripped and frozen, and she'd never directly called out to him since he'd shuffled off the dust of centuries and slipped into her life.

Now his name slipped and whispered against her teeth, sibilant and soft, full of death and beauty, like wine and chocolate. She said it again, because it tasted so good.

"Sesshoumaru."

He rumbled something unintelligible into her skin, and then his strong fingers were on her chin, pulling her face towards his own, and she was gone, spiraling open beneath him, thighs and veins and lips blooming under his touch, and his lips, soft and hot and damp, brushed against the plane of her cheek. Her body shuddered, and she was falling, slipping and electrified, over the edge of the cliff. And in the midst of the firestorm, Sesshoumaru slipped his arm beneath

her neck, pried her hand from her burning cheek, and twined his fingers with hers, pressing their palms together.

He held her hand as she came, and above her own cries, Kagome could hear the crystalline sound of her heart breaking.

He held on as he came hard, pulling her into him so violently she thought she would have bruises where he touched her, and his fingers were like iron on hers.

Sesshoumaru didn't let go even as he drifted to sleep, still locked to her.

Kagome wished she could disappear.

* * *

There once was a nothing girl.

Kanna was a void, a hole cut out of the world, drifting between here and there, the eldest of Naraku's horrible, cold children. Whenever Kagome caught a glimpse of her bland white form she felt as though someone was walking across her grave.

A little girl, pale and ghostly, had stood in front of her with a mirror held loosely in her hands and large, empty eyes that seemed to consider nothing to be of interest. The complete, unadulterated boredom that had been painted on the girl's face had given her pause, even as Sango had charged forward, Hiraikotsu swinging over her head with practiced ease and a ferocity borne of the desire to protect her friends.

Calmly, the little white girl moved the mirror through her hands, and then Hiraikotsu stopped - and beneath her arm, she felt the village girl Koharu shudder just a little bit. And then the boomerang was hurtling back through the air, knocking into Sango with a sickening thud.

Above the roar of panic in her ears, Kagome heard Shippou shout something as he leapt forward, but both he and the demon huntress caught a glancing blow from the boomerang. Kagome watched with vague horror as together they tumbled backwards and Hiraikotsu slammed into the wall behind her. Bow clutched in her hands, Kagome took a step forward, calling out their names.

"Sango-chan! Shippou-chan!"

The debris from the boomerang's impact was flying through the air, but she could still see that neither of them was moving.

Kagome darted forward, heart in her throat. Sango lay limp, like a broken matchstick doll, on the hard wood floor. Her jaw was slack, and the strands of her hair were caught against her skin, as though she had been thrown there by a petulant child. Irrationally, Kagome thought that she must be uncomfortable in that position, and her fingers twitched with the desire to move her head into a more satisfying position, except there was no time. Only she and Koharu were conscious, and the little girl was taking slow, measured steps toward her, face devoid of malice

or benevolence. Slowly, inexorably, she advanced, and Kagome's heart clenched as though clutched in a spiny fist. Cold terror seeped through her chest.

The bow was slippery in her sweaty fist, and she couldn't decide what to do. Youkai took on many forms, but she'd never had to take on the form of a young girl before, and something was rebelling in her. The form of a child, usually so innocent and pure, took on a particularly malevolent shade when coupled with cruel intent, and one only had to look at the empty, soulless eyes of the little girl to know that she harbored no kindness in her heart.

"Kagome," she whispered, and it was like wind in a desert.

"Soul."

Fingers tightening, Kagome straightened -

- and arms snaked around her, held her fast.

"What-?" she mumbled half-coherently, not comprehending. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the face of Koharu, twisted and determined, but in front of her the pale, ghostly girl shifted slightly, and the mirror in her hands flashed brightly in the dark of the room.

In the polished surface, Kagome saw her own reflection, and it was like opening the door of the world and stepping out.

No, it was more than that. To look at Kanna and her pretty little mirror was to feel as though she were floating in the air and staring down into a deep abyss that had no bottom, just an endless blackness. All around was air, but beneath her there was nothing, only a yawning emptiness that would never be filled.

In those moments as she wheeled over an empty eternity, Kagome was more afraid than she'd ever been in her life - more afraid of the endlessness than she was of Naraku, of losing Inuyasha, of living her life alone. Terror, blind and cold, wrapped around her, and if she could have opened her mouth to scream against the void, she would have.

She could feel her soul spilling out.

And then her perspective shifted and changed, and the void grew deeper and deeper, drawing inward, narrowing, focusing.

Kagome looked into eternity, and eternity looked back ☺

At the edge of her hearing, someone took a step, and then there was wood beneath her, buoying her up through the emptiness.

Kagome gasped, blinked, and found the girl in front of her again. With great effort, she pulled herself into a sitting position, nocked her arrow, and aimed it at the girl.

In those empty eyes, the ghost of surprise echoed.

Her heavy panting breaths sounded loud in the room, but weak though she was Kagome feared the void more than injury.

And that was Kanna's power.

* * *

They had turned away from each other in the night. Cracking open one eye, the first thing Kagome saw was the textured wall next to her bed, the shadows from its myriad of bumps and lines turning it into an off-white color despite the glare of the sun through her lacy curtains. The warm weight of Sesshoumaru at her back was gone.

For a moment, she thought he'd already arisen and moved to his proper place in the living room, but after carefully turning over and catching a glimpse of his bare shoulder swelling from beneath the sheets Kagome flushed bright red and lay very still, hoping he wouldn't wake up.

She'd never really woken up in the same bed as anyone else before. Sure, there were all the times in the past when she and Shippou had shared a bedroll, but that was not nearly the same thing. For one, Shippou was like a teddy bear and was easily moved or dealt with. Two, there were no mattresses in the Sengoku Jidai, so movement did not have the same sort of breathless peril attached. Three, she and Shippou had also never shared carnal knowledge.

Kagome felt dirty, spiritually as well as physically. There was dried sweat on her skin this morning, and she was still sticky and warm in her nether regions - Kagome silently gave a prayer of thanks to the gods of Birth Control - and neither sensation was helping her shuffle off the guilt that was creeping over her. She hoped feverishly that he wouldn't turn over and look at her, or make any advances. She was feeling extremely unsexy this morning.

He wasn't moving. In the light of the morning sun, his pale skin seemed to glow. His damn skin always seemed to glow, Kagome groused silently, trying to distract herself from her dark, guilty mood.

The curve of his shoulder beckoned her to touch it, and his beautiful silver hair cascaded over his skin and pooled coolly on the sheets behind him. Kagome frowned, wondering if he was ever subjected to bed-head. Probably not, she decided. Truly, the universe was an unfair place.

Kagome shifted experimentally, but Sesshoumaru seemed completely insensate to the world outside his head, and slept on. Taking great care, she slid out from beneath the sheets and off the side of the bed, trying as hard as she could to be weightless. Easing to her feet, she let her hair fall into her eyes so she wouldn't look at him and accidentally... wake him up, or perhaps accidentally have sex with him again, or maybe she would accidentally tackle him and kill him. As quietly as possible, she edged around the bed and escaped into the bathroom.

She was spending a lot of time in here lately, she mused as she hopped into the shower and scrubbed her body down with alternately cold and hot water, as if she could clean away her embarrassment or her shame or her past beneath the spray of the water. Working the shampoo into her hair, Kagome closed her eyes and tried to order her mind around the mess of her life.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

This time yesterday, she and Sesshoumaru were still in their separate rooms, sequestered away from each other, and they hadn't touched yet. Today, they... well, they weren't exactly lovers, more like casual sexual partners. Today, she was a loose woman.

Kagome raked her fingers through her hair and clenched her jaw. Today she was going to go out and buy clothes for him and hope that he would leave her house in as expedient a manner as possible. The sooner he was acclimated to the world as it existed today, the sooner he would step out of her life and quit tempting her with his beautiful face and the strange promise of things remembered, and she could go back to being the good girl that she had always been. And that was how it should be.

Swirling her wash cloth over her skin, Kagome nodded, a renewed sense of purpose filling her. He needed clothes and he needed her to guide him into the world again, but once she had fulfilled that purpose he would definitely have to leave. It wasn't like she was expecting him to stick around, anyway.

Shutting off the water, Kagome shoved away the thought of Sesshoumaru and her ambiguous place in his life with a determined lift of her head. Swiftly she dried her body and toweled her long, wet locks into an acceptable state of dampness. Opting for the quieter option of air-drying, she quickly wove her hair into a braid down her back before pulling her thin dressing gown over her shoulders and opening the door as quietly as possible. She hissed silently through her teeth at the sight that greeted her.

Sesshoumaru was still sleeping, or at the very least he was pretending to sleep. It didn't really matter. He was lying on his side, facing her, with one hand draped over the hard planes of his hip and the other tucked up beneath the pillow. He was covered by the sheet from the waist down, but above the sheet she could see the sharp, solid lines of muscle in his stomach and across his chest. The arm he had propped beneath his head bulged gently against his sleeping face, and over all of it spilled little trickles of silver hair. He seemed to be pouting, very slightly, in his sleep.

She remembered the second time she'd seen him, and he'd tried to steal away Inuyasha's sword. She'd fought him, let her arrows fly through the air, one to strike the blade of the Tessaiga and one to strike, his armor and then another to melt away in his poisoned fingertips. And she remembered when he'd nearly killed Kohaku, but had let him go, and walked off with a little girl who shone like the sun trailing in his wake. And she remembered him towering over her in a mist of poison, the most unlikely savior. And she remembered the sweep of his blade of life at the end of the road.

He was so beautiful, asleep in her bed, and she didn't want to leave.

Kagome stood there for a long time as her hair dried, watching him sleep.

* * *

"Okay!" Kagome announced in a loud voice when she arrived home that afternoon to find Sesshoumaru lounging on the floor, stretched out with his head propped on the sofa. He was wearing his customary kimono and hakama.

Well, she thought, I guess that's going to change. She felt a little bit of falling sadness, but pushed it away. "I bought clothes for you. And tonight we're going on the roof."

The demon looked up from the manga he was reading. "The roof?" he asked, one eyebrow arching into his hair. "Why would we do that?" He seemed genuinely puzzled.

Kagome huffed in slight exasperation. "We're going to the roof so you can start to acclimate yourself to the smells of the city. If you can't stand the smell of the cars and the pollution, you'll never be able to leave," she informed him as she set her bags down next to her feet and began to rifle through them. Her fingers caught a few articles of modern clothes. "Here," she said, drawing them out, "here are a couple of shirts. I thought white would be best - they button up the front and at the wrists, and I have a couple of pairs of pants, too, and some socks, and I even bought shoes - "

"Have you read this?" Sesshoumaru said abruptly, cutting her off. Kagome looked up at him, caught slightly off guard.

"What?" she asked. Mentally she cursed herself; it seemed like every other word out of her mouth these days was what, and it was tiring to hear herself become so boring. Still, there was nothing else to say.

"This boy and his father were cursed in China," Sesshoumaru was saying, "and now when they get splashed with cold water, he becomes a girl, and his father becomes a panda bear." He seemed bemused. Kagome was certainly bemused. She blinked very rapidly before regaining the upper hand in her brain.

"Yes, I've read it," she informed him, "but that's not important right now. Right now, could you try these on, so I can return them if they don't - "

"I always thought the Chinese were a bit strange..." he ignored her.

She thought about saying his name, but that thought was quickly quieted. It would be almost blasphemous somehow, now that she'd avoided saying out loud for so long; it was as though his name was meant for other things than just getting his attention.

"Hey!" she exclaimed instead. "Are you listening to me?"

He let the manga volume fall against his chest and looked her in the eye. "So eager to be rid of me, miko?" he asked softly, a strange little smile quirking the corners of his lips. There was no humor in it.

Kagome felt herself deflate a little. "I..." she began, then stopped. No, she wanted to say. No, no, no. But she didn't say that. "Don't you get tired?" she asked.

"Of what?" he wanted to know.

"Of..." - me - "...sitting around my apartment, reading books, watching TV." She shrugged helplessly. "Petting my cat."

Sesshoumaru appeared to think about this. "Hm," he said, tilting his head as if to say, not yet, but thanks for the suggestion.

Kagome sighed and closed her eyes. "Sorry," she said. "I don't mean to be presumptuous. I just thought you might be bored, and might want to... get out and about. Do something."

She opened her eyes to find him still looking at her. Slowly he rose from the floor and stood. "Thank you for the clothes," he said in that same low tone, paced towards her, and held out a clawed hand. Silently she passed the shirts to him and he unfolded a white button down that she had picked out.

"Oh, here," she said suddenly, digging again. "I got you some undershirts, too. You put one of them on first, and then the over-shirt."

He took the undershirts without a word and went back to the couch where he tossed them carelessly on the cushions and began to shrug out of his clothes.

"Eep!" Kagome squeaked, habit overtaking her, a blush flooding to her cheeks. "Not in front of me!" she said shrilly, covering her eyes with her hands. She took a step back, and her heel hit the second shopping bag and knocked it over, sending the well-folded pants and the box of shoes spilling onto the floor.

Over the pounding of embarrassment in her ears, she heard him laugh. She peeked at him from between her fingers.

He was standing in the middle of the room, kimono hanging around his waist and skin bare. The white undershirt hung from his fingers, and on his face was that same smile. This time it reached his eyes. "Still so shy, miko?" he asked.

"Sorry," she told him, and then she laughed. It seemed so ridiculous, all of a sudden. "Sorry." She dropped her hands and looked at him, and he at her. They were silent for a moment, neither seeming to know what to say.

"Well," he said finally.

Kagome laughed and stepped forward, taking the shirt from his fingers and demonstrating on herself. "Just put your arms through here," she said, slipping her hands into the sleeves, "and put it over your head," - here she slipped her head through the neck - "and you just pull it down." She pulled the shirt the rest of the way down and swept her hair free.

He looked at her with amusement, and then repeated her actions with another shirt. His hair proved a small obstacle, but he overcame it, eventually.

And then she showed him how to button the shirt, and demonstrated the workings of the pants and new - undergarments, she still blushed at the thought - and then left him to finish disrobing and reclothing himself as she tucked his extra clothes away on a few hangers in her closet.

The thing that struck her the most was how remarkably natural it suddenly seemed to do this, and how easily he had submitted to her instruction. It was... odd, she reflected as she smoothed a pair of pants against her body, keeping the creases sharp, but also far from unpleasant. With a sigh of near-contentment, she hooked the hanger over the rod and smiled. His new garments seemed small and paltry next to her wide collection of outfits, but still - it was nice to have them there, as though he had crawled into her room, settled down and melted into the corners of her life that had been left long bare by absence. Carefully, she smoothed the cloth hanging down, as she'd seen her mother do so many times, before stepping away and keeping her eyes down as she walked to the door of her room.

"Are you decent?" she asked, studying a small loose thread by her big toe.

"Yes," he said.

Kagome looked up.

Sesshoumaru, now in casual, modern clothes, looked at her with inscrutable eyes from the middle of the living room.

The pants he wore weren't the best quality, but they fit him well, slightly snug through the hips and falling against the outline of his thighs down to the floor, falling over his bare feet. The sharp creases down the front emphasized the shape of his legs. The shirt seemed thin in comparison to his normal clothing, and he hadn't tucked it in, so the tails fell loose over his waistband. The shirt was unbuttoned at his throat, gaping open slightly. He'd rolled his sleeves up, revealing the stripes that graced his wrists, and that was the only part she liked.

Kagome's chest hurt. He looked almost naked, even more bare than when he was actually nude, and without the thick clothing of his own era he appeared small and vulnerable. His long, beautiful hair seemed ridiculous, and the stripes and crest on his face were queer, alien.

She was finding it hard to breathe.

"I do not look pleasing?" Sesshoumaru asked quietly, expression not changing.

Sucking her lower lip between her teeth, Kagome stepped forward, shaking her head. She stopped directly in front of him, unable to look him in the eye, and didn't say anything for a moment. It was so difficult for her to breathe around the heavy weight that squatted behind her sternum, but finally she was able to force air into her throat. "You look good," she said, voice strangled. "You look great." And he did. He wore the clothes beautifully, as he did everything beautifully. Sesshoumaru wrapped the universe around himself and wore it beautifully, but that was not the problem.

At the edge of her vision, she saw him tip his head gently, and a long strand of shining hair fell over his shoulder, brushed his chest. "Then it does not please you," he said.

She blinked, and was shocked to find tears welling in her eyes. When did that happen? Kagome fluttered her eyelids, willing them away, staring at the front of his shirt.

"No." Her head was shaking back and forth, and her fingers were working their way down his chest, slowly maneuvering the buttons through their holes, loosening the fabric, pushing it away from him. "No."

Sesshoumaru said nothing as Kagome smoothed her hands over his chest, still covered in the undershirt she'd helped him with, worked her hands up underneath his collar and pushed the shirt down. The demon didn't move as she pulled the fabric over his back, and her face was so close to his shoulder that she could have leaned in - just an inch, just the space of a heartbeat - and planted a kiss on the swell of muscle there if she had been brave enough. She stared, fascinated, at the fall of silken hair draped softly over his shoulder, at the pale, perfect skin of his neck, disappearing beneath the white cotton collar of the undershirt, at the swell and ebb of muscle beneath the fabric. From the corner of her eye, she could make out the hard line of his jaw, the flat plane of his cheek.

Her hands were still moving over the warmth of his back. At his wrists, the shirt gathered loosely, and then he bowed his head slightly, lips drawing close to her ear.

Kagome could hear him breathing, just ever so slightly picking up pace beneath her touch. She could see his chest rise and fall.

Gritting her teeth, she tried to block him out of her mind and concentrated on the task at hand. She swept her fingers down his arms and felt the muscles jerk beneath his skin as she removed the shirt entirely. Still not looking directly at him, she let it fall to the floor as she forced her hands to her sides.

"You don't have to wear these when you are just with me," she told him, and she didn't know if she was demanding or pleading.

"You like the other clothes better?" he murmured, as though he were speaking to a child.

She nodded. "Yes," she said.

"Hm." He gave that short, sharp laugh that wasn't really a laugh at all, and Kagome shivered at the vibration of his voice in her bones. They were so close that if she took a deep breath, her breasts would brush against him, but instead she fought to keep her breathing shallow, her hands at her sides, mimicking his posture. She stayed still, even though he was right in front of her and she ached, bone deep, to touch him.

Sesshoumaru moved his mouth to her ear.

Kagome felt her skin dissolve into shivers, crawling over her bones as he moved his warm, soft lips against the shell of her ear, planting gentle, hungry kisses over the flesh of her ear lobe, moving down to her throat and brushing sweetly over her pulse. His nose brushed against the small hairs at her nape, sending a shot of electricity through her. Mouth dry, eyes fluttering

closed, she suddenly found herself listing into him, nose and chin resting gently against his shoulder, hot breath escaping through parted lips as his tongue darted out and tasted her.

Wasn't this supposed to not happen again? The sudden thought flashed across her brain, drawing her up short, and without thinking she took a heavy step back, away from him.

Sesshoumaru did not follow her, merely straightened and gave her a blank look, and a hollow pang of loss stabbed her through the heart as the warmth faded from her body.

She was suddenly so, so tired. Sighing, Kagome closed her eyes, once, idly wishing that she could just fall asleep there on her feet. Opening them again, she looked at Sesshoumaru, who hadn't moved.

"I'm going to take a nap, and tonight we'll go on the roof so you can start to get used to the smell of the city," she informed him.

Sesshoumaru nodded. As though the past few minutes had been pinched out of existence, extinguished like a candle flame, Kagome nodded politely back before she turned and went to her room. Not bothering to close the door, she laid down, fully clothed, atop the bed covers and let her eyes slide shut.

If I ignore it, it will go away, she thought, and it sounded facetious even inside the confines of her own mind. Lips quirking, Kagome let her breathing slow as she shuffled off her turbulent heart and descended into slumber.

* * *

Staring at her feet as she climbed the outside fire-escape at the back of her building, Kagome was acutely, humiliatingly aware of the proximity of Sesshoumaru's face to her behind. Granted, she was wearing a skirt, but that didn't make her feel better - it just meant he would have better access should he decide to pull a Miroku on her.

The journey up the stairs was horribly long. Kagome's apartment building was fairly tall, and they'd had to make their way down to the street before scurrying around the back and climbing to the top as furtively as possible. The long silver hair and facial markings distinguished the demon far more than she was comfortable with, and it was best to avoid prying eyes. She had debated instructing him to carry her in one long leap to the top, but decided against it. Expediency was not nearly as important as avoidance of notice.

Sesshoumaru had stayed dressed in his new clothes for this adventure. Kagome supposed that it made sense for him to not wear his more traditional garb, but it stung a little to see him, especially since she had made her preference embarrassingly clear. Bygones, I suppose, she mentally sighed, staring at her sensible shoes as she labored ever upward. Behind her, Sesshoumaru ascended, silent as a ghost.

When they crested the edge of the roof, Kagome didn't bother looking back at him but instead strode across the asphalt. She'd never been there before. It looked as though another fellow tenant, similarly devoid of a balcony, had laid claim to a small area of the available space for a

little garden of ferns and a few flowers. Kagome gave the garden a cursory glance, but reluctantly moved away from it. As much as she simply wanted to sit in the flowers and clear her mind, the scent would defeat the purpose of making the short trip to the top in the first place, so instead she walked to the other end of the roof.

It was a nice night. The waning moon was high above, oddly bright in the sky, and only a few wispy clouds scuttled across the darkness. In the past - the real past, not just her own - the stars would have glittered like carelessly scattered glass, but now the sky looked dim and smoky, and only a few little pinpricks shone through.

Kagome looked away from the sky and cast about for a place to spread out her blanket. Uncertain as to the surface of the roof, she had bundled beneath her arm a fairly faded yet comfortably squashy bedspread that her mother had bought for her when she was first moving out of the house, back when she was still studying premed.

"My little girl, moving out," her mother had announced proudly to no one in particular as Kagome had weeded through the clothes - all of them seemed so childish now - that she had decided to toss out. The guilt she had felt had been crushing. Her mother seemed so happy to know that she was making friends and didn't want to upset things at home, but Kagome had just wanted to escape. She'd never considered it to be a possibility, but it seemed there was such a thing as too much love.

Too much love smothered. Too much love strangled her. She'd fled the shrine with the new bedspread, vowing to not use it in her new place - her own place - yet the loneliness was oppressive, and she'd often pulled it down from the top shelf of her closet and wrapped herself up as she sat at the kitchen table and let silent tears fall into her tea.

Funny how she was whipping it out now. How is it possible, she thought now, vaguely, in the darker corners of her mind as she shook the bedspread and set it out on a random patch of asphalt near the edge, for both love and loneliness to be so horrible, and yet neither ever seems to alleviate the other? One of life's stupid ironies, she supposed. She glanced over at Sesshoumaru, who stood silent and shining a few feet away, staring at the moon.

He was so pale that his features seemed to melt beneath the silvery light, and only a gentle, warm summer breeze stirred his hair. She wondered how any living thing in the world could be so utterly still, so mute and unmoving that it seemed he had stopped the blood in his veins. Giving a little sigh, Kagome looked at the moon as well, and wondered what he saw there before giving him a calculating look from the corner of her eye.

Tonight, she determined, watching him as he continued to gaze into the night sky, I'm not going to let him get the better of me. We're going to hang out here, on this rooftop, and have a grand old time sniffing the air. In truth, she was a little nervous, but that sort of thing had never seemed to stop her before, way back when. She wasn't going to be shy or reticent like she always was around him. She was going to be herself. She would talk to him, and he to her, so the sharpness of the silence between them, the gulf between their words and actions, wouldn't seem so huge and empty.

No time like the present, as her mother always told her. "Would you like to sit?" she asked him, her voice sounding muted in the heavy, warm air.

With deliberate care, he turned his head toward her and nodded.

Kagome lowered herself to the blanket, tucking her legs to the side in the most ladylike position possible and propping herself on a hand braced against the ground, not watching as Sesshoumaru settled in beside her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him cross his legs and arms, back stiff and straight as she had seen Inuyasha do so many times. The posture should have tickled her mind, made her sad with remembering. However, lacking any voluminous sleeves into which he could tuck his hands, or thick hakama to hide the contours of his legs, he looked awkward and strange. His knees stuck out too far beneath the cheap cloth of his trousers, and his arms were crossed across his chest at an odd angle, narrowing his shoulders. Instead of looking dignified, he looked almost... well, goofy.

Goofy. The word floated across her mind, and she tried to attach it to him, but it kept slipping away. She'd never seen him look goofy before.

She tried to ignore it and stare at the sky in silence, pursing her lips.

Goofy.

A little snigger escaped her before she could stifle it.

"Something funny, miko?" Sesshoumaru asked, not looking at her.

Was there any point in lying? "Yes," she replied, biting the inside of her cheek to keep the smile from spreading as she turned toward him. "Here, unfold your arms."

The youkai gave her a blank look. Underneath his opaque yellow eyes, she thought she saw a tendril of confusion snake up and grab him, and the impression made her bite her cheek harder. It's not polite to laugh at the indignities of others, she scolded herself even as her lips twitched slightly and another unkind snicker welled up in her chest.

"Here, here," she said, looking away from his face so she wouldn't laugh at him. Intensely aware that she usually didn't touch him, Kagome reached out and took his hands from his forearms and laid them on his knees. "There," she said, sitting back and removing her fingers from his wrists. "That looks better."

Sesshoumaru was still staring at her.

Annoyed, Kagome shrugged at him and turned away. Fine. Look silly. See if I care. Sighing, she tucked her knees up behind an arm, and propped an elbow on top, jamming her fist into her cheek and turning her attention to the sky again.

"How is your nose holding up?" she asked him. It seemed as good as anything to say, and was the purpose of this exercise after all.

He tilted his head in his little elegant shrug. "It is not entirely unpleasant," he told her. He sounded odd and distant, as though his answer was just a throwaway thing, something he hadn't thought about deliberately. It was the first time she'd ever heard him sound nonchalant.

Amused by this sudden, newfound ability for small-talk, Kagome pulled out an old favorite. "It's a beautiful night, tonight, isn't it?" she said.

"Mm," he replied. Kagome smiled.

It really was a beautiful night, warm and clear, and Kagome imagined that she could almost shut out the hum of the city around her. In many ways, it was just like one of the myriad of nights she'd spent in the open air in the Sengoku Jidai, Miroku and Inuyasha propped against trees, Sango curled against Kirara, and Shippou sawing logs next to her in her bedroll. Briefly, she wished for a little fire there on the roof, just to make it seem like the old days again. She wondered if Sesshoumaru remembered those times the way she did.

Slanting another look at him, Kagome frowned lightly, and forced her reservations aside.

"Tell me," she said, "what was it like for you?"

For a moment, the demon didn't say anything and Kagome was on the verge of repeating the question when he turned his face away from the moon and towards her. Instead of speaking, he merely cocked his head, blinking, puzzlement moving beneath his stoic face.

Kagome grinned at him, realizing that she had asked the question with no preamble. "Sorry," she said, searching for the right words to make him understand. "I mean, tonight is just so much like... back then."

Sesshoumaru quirked an eyebrow. "The past," he said. It wasn't a question or a statement, merely a supplement. Kagome wondered if he ever thought she was crazy or stupid, telling him that she traveled through time.

She nodded. "It just reminds me of that time."

"Ten years ago," he replied, then added, "for you."

Sighing, she nodded again, smile fading. "Yes," she told him. "Over four hundred years for you." She looked away again, toward the stars. "What was it like, back then?"

He was quiet for a long while, and twice she almost asked him again, but instead she kept her mouth shut, feeling the fluttering of her blood in her veins. Finally he spoke.

"Back then," he said, then stopped. She heard him sigh gently. "Once, I slept beneath the summer sky. But," he added, voice low and cool, "all summer nights are the same."

Kagome shivered at something in his voice, something that extended one icy claw and dragged it through her middle and she whipped her head around to face him, and saw that he was staring into the distance. It wasn't an intense stare, but rather unfocused, veiled. Weirdly, he

looked almost wistful. "What do you mean?" she demanded, feeling the sharp edge in her voice. "What are you talking about?"

"I meant what I said."

"But what about then?" she said. "What about when we were looking for Naraku?"

Sesshoumaru snorted softly. "That," he murmured, "is a name I have not heard in a long, long time." Beneath the skin of his throat, the muscles worked in a swallow.

Kagome thought she understood. "I know," she said. "Brings back memories, doesn't it?"

The demon finally turned to look at her. "Not really," he replied. The breeze lifted his hair gently, swelling and falling.

Lips thinning, Kagome dropped her eyes. "I haven't spoken his name in years," she said. "Nights like this, I remember what it was like, falling asleep, wondering if he would come out of the woods."

"That was not his way."

"I know," she answered. "But it was like chasing a ghost. He could have come out of nowhere. He wouldn't, but he could have."

Down on the street below, someone honked a horn. Sesshoumaru seemed to take no notice. "You still think of him," he said, oblivious to everything but the conversation.

A little uncomfortable, Kagome let a small laugh escape her. "Well," she said, "I think of everybody, almost every day. Don't you?"

"No."

The night was warm and sweet, but in her stomach Kagome felt a hollow blackness open, like a trapdoor, unexpected and unknown until too late.

"How is that possible?" she asked. Inuyasha - his name was still painful, uttered only in the silence of her mind. "I think of them always. They are always with me. What about you, what about Jaken, and Rin?"

"What about them?" he replied. "They are dead."

"But - "

Sesshoumaru stood abruptly, moving to his feet in a fluid movement before stepping in front of her. Before her eyes, the youkai extended a clawed, striped hand. The motion seemed so peculiar that it took her a moment to realize that he was waiting for her to take his hand so he could help her to her feet.

Confused, unable to refuse the polite gesture, Kagome placed her hand in his, and he pulled her up effortlessly. She let her hand relax, but he didn't let go then. Instead, he led her to the side of the roof, where a little half-wall ran around the perimeter before releasing her.

It was funny how just a brush of his palm against hers sent sharp, dark desire through her veins when they'd done so much more than just hold hands. Self-consciously she drew her hand to her chest and held it close, trying to quell the frisson of desire that made her mouth water. Sesshoumaru took no notice. Instead, he placed his own hands on the ledge, and gazed down over the street. Not knowing what else to do, Kagome mimicked his posture.

They said nothing for a while, and Kagome let her mind wander from thought to thought. Simple, idle things that she brushed by, forgotten as soon as she had touched them, and all of them skirting the black hole inside her.

It was strange, like d�j� vu. "You know," she finally said, conversationally, "Inuyasha and I used to watch the stars toge - "

"Do not think of that."

His voice was sharp, though only sharp as a dull blade, warning her, but he didn't move. He stayed still, looking out upon city with his strange eyes.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded again, but his lips were already moving.

"You live too much in memory, miko," he said, voice soft against the dull roar of the city night.

No, she thought. No, that isn't right. That's all I have. She shook her head. "What? How can that be? My memories are what make me." Beneath the darkness of her heart, anger kindled.

"They do?" he asked. He sounded amused, but there was a bitter taste to it. "And do they make you anything other than sad and lost?"

Her jaw moved, but her words were silent, caught somewhere between her chest and her tongue, between her heart and the dull, warm night.

"Memory," he murmured, "is not for you and me. Our memories always have endings." He was staring over the street now, golden eyes dark with recollection and ghosts. "Time steals it all away."

Kagome felt something blister and peel away at his words. Sesshoumaru turned and looked at her.

"You remember too much. Remember only the beginning, not the end."

"I - "

"Once," he cut her off, voice like red velvet and blue glass. "Once. Once I killed a dragon with only my teeth."

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

He flashed a feral grin.

"Once, I met an old woman on a snow covered bridge. Once I hunted with my father. Once I fell from a great height."

Across her mind, Sesshoumaru ran through a snow storm, teeth bared. Howling at the moon, he plummeted from the edge of a cliff, an ancient woman with the bright eyes of a child clutched in his arms. Kagome reeled.

In the dark, he blinked, very slowly. "Once I fell in love on a mountainside."

Jealousy sparked in her heart then, and hope, but his perfect face killed her question in her throat, strangled it on the vine. With who, with who - ?

Kagome opened her mouth. "Once," she replied, "I fell down a well. Once I pulled an arrow from the heart of a hanyou boy."

His eyes flickered, briefly.

She licked her lips. "Once I lay with a youkai lord," she said, and the words were like dark wings beating against her heart.

He regarded her, his face cold but his eyes smouldering. "Once," he said softly, "I had a miko."

Was she beautiful? Was she good? Did you want to love her? her mind chanted. She opened her mouth. "Was she - ?"

"Ah," he breathed, and his cool fingertips were resting against her heated mouth. Kagome blinked, confused, wanting.

"We are not made for memory," he said, and he sounded as though he was far, far away, "and our memories are not made for others."

Through her teeth, Kagome sucked her breath, and then he had closed the gap, face buried in her hair.

"These are things the world never needs to know," he whispered, and then her trembling hands were on his chest and he was already running greedy fingers over her body.

Kagome moaned, arching into him, one leg hooked over his thigh, pressing his hips to hers. "Don't," she pleaded, head falling back as he worked his way down her body with his hungry mouth, "don't." Don't tell me these things. Don't tell me these things, make me forget, burn them away, but don't ask me to do it myself -

She melted into him, plucking at him as though she were trying to pull him around her. He was kissing her now, across her brow, over her ear and down her throat, fastening his hands in her hair, pulling her down with him as they sank together to their knees, and Kagome whimpered when her bare skin hit the pavement.

"Ow - " she mumbled, incoherently, at the sting of asphalt on her knees, biting into the bone. She shifted uncomfortably, seeking a better purchase on the roof.

"Shhh," she thought she heard him say, and suddenly the world tipped and turned and he was lifting her in the air as he lowered himself, like a slow fall backwards, onto the blanket.

"Oh!" she said, startled, straddling him, Sesshoumaru beautifully spread out beneath her. The demon ran his hands over the swell of her thighs, across the softness of her stomach before curling upwards and looping an arm around her neck. He was so strong, and she didn't want to fight him as he snaked a hand beneath her skirt, ran his tongue down her throat, and all the while his hips arched rhythmically, helplessly, into her.

"I've never done this before," she mumbled as he worked her panties down over her hips, making a frustrated sound when he hit the obstacle of her spread thighs. "I've never - "

"Be quiet," he murmured before drawing a nipple into his mouth through the rough cotton fabric of her blouse, working the buttons with one hand.

Biting her lip, hot and needy, Kagome wiggled out of her panties as he pulled her bra down and then undid the fastenings at his waist, freeing himself to the night air before guiding her hand to him. She drew a shuddering breath as he tugged her back to straddle him again, erection nudging against her as he did something amazing to the outside swell of her breast. Oh god oh god oh god -

Her need almost painful now, Kagome reached down and wrapped her fingers around him, guided him inside her, an aching, stinging glide. Sesshoumaru groaned softly and sank his teeth ever so slightly into her chest before sliding to a stop, deep inside her. He leaned back, running his hands down to her waist, slowing to a stop on her hips.

Not good, this is bad - "I've never been on top," she forced out, trying to keep her eyes open. Another memory, she thought. This is just another memory.

Inside her, Sesshoumaru shifted. Kagome gasped, toes curling.

"It doesn't matter," he murmured, his breathing so heavy he spoke in strangled whispers. "Just move."

She did.

On her hip, his hand clenched reflexively, the tips of his claws pricking her through the thick fabric of her skirt, and he pulled her against him.

"Kagome," he groaned into her ear.

Kagome lifted her eyes to the moon, and she moved with him, helpless, hopeless, in the summer night.

Later, curled against him in her bed, Kagome bit her lip.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Once, she thought, I lay with a youkai lord beneath the Tokyo moon.

* * *

There once was a broken boy.

Kohaku, Sango always said, was a good boy. Kind and gentle and never meant to be a killer, Kohaku moved among them, always a ghost, always someone that none of them had seen.

Kohaku was Sango's cherished burden. He was just a young boy on the cusp of adolescence when he had been pierced through with arrows and buried in the earth, and it might have ended there if Naraku hadn't intervened and dragged him back into the world of the living. With his memories banished and his sad, forgotten love wiped from his heart he was just a machine that wore the body of Sango's beloved little brother.

There was still something there, though. When they found him without his murderous intent or the blank slate of his mind, he was scared and young again. It was astonishing to Kagome that he could still be the person he truly was when all the things that had made him that way were locked away from him, sequestered in some inaccessible part of his head where he couldn't reach them. She marveled that Sango found Kohaku, despite the fact that Kohaku was shut away from even himself.

Fear, and no more arrows. That had been the biggest problem that had been facing them. Impulsively, she'd grabbed his hand, and linked together they had fled from the fight that Sango held, but there had been danger all around. Behind each turn in the forest, there had been a horde of youkai looking for them, seeking to take the precious shard embedded in the boy's back. With gritted teeth, she had whipped arrows from the quiver strapped to her back and purified them all, but the problem with arrows was that they ran out eventually. Kagome supposed that it was not a good idea to engage in combat when one could run out of ammunition, but there had never been any time to learn anything else.

As her fingers closed on the empty air at the back of her neck, she wished fervently for a sword, or a jo, or anything, but as always she had nothing to fall back on.

Her heart beat in a frantic rhythm as Kagome cast about, searching for somewhere to hide. Mercifully, her eyes lit on a small cave.

"There!" she'd said, trying to keep her voice below a shriek for Kohaku's sake. "Let's hide in that cave!"

Not waiting for his answer, she grabbed his fragile fingers and ran for the entrance. Swiftly she shoved him in front of her and let him slither through the narrow opening before following him, scraping a number of ribs in the process and jarring her knees as she hit the floor.

Panting, and momentarily safe, she looked around, taking in the hard earthen walls and the scared, white face of Kohaku. A stab of guilt went through her - she was supposed to be taking care of him, but wasn't doing such a hot job - and she turned away. They couldn't go outside, so the only thing she could do was wait with him in silence.

So they waited.

It was cramped inside, and the only light came from the small entrance. The proximity of the ceiling made her shift uncomfortably where she sat, trying not to think about structural integrity and landslides and mummified remains found hundreds of thousands of years after drowning in peat bogs.

Don't think about it, she told herself. Don't think about heavy things falling on your head and smashing up your brains into brain goo. Don't think about that. Don't do it. Just... don't... think... about...

Kagome squirmed and moved toward the fresh air outside, just as a few of Naraku's horrible bees flew past.

Nevermind! she thought gaily as she hastily retreated into the cool darkness. We'll just wait here until Inuyasha and the others come back. She ground her teeth, striving to make her mind blank and peaceful...

"That woman," Kohaku said behind her.

Distracted, Kagome turned toward him, relieved to be able to focus on something other than the imminent danger of ending up either squished or stuck between youkai teeth. "Eh?" she queried.

"Will she be okay?" the boy asked. His shoulders were hunched slightly, and he was looking into the middle distance, a pensive sadness etched into his face.

"Oh!" she hastened to assure him. "Sango-chan is strong, so don't worry!"

Kohaku had said nothing, merely thinned his lips, looking anxious.

What is he feeling? she wondered. What does it feel like to care for someone, and not know why?

He looked so sad.

"Say, Kohaku-kun," she said before she could stop herself, "you still don't remember that Sango-chan is your sister?"

Kohaku nodded. "But somehow... I like her very much," he said, and he sounded as though he felt a little lighter than before.

Kagome scooted a little closer. "You should know that Sango-chan worries about you all the time. She always stays strong, but she gets sad, too. So I'm glad you're here."

His eyes widened slightly and he drew back, as though surprised he could bring someone joy, as though shocked someone wanted to be with him. "Then... it would be okay for me to stay?"

"Of course!" she replied quickly, wanting to reassure him, to soothe him. "And eventually, you will remember Sango-chan."

He still looked worried, but nodded. "Okay."

Her momentary relief was short-lived though, and Kagome turned away and stared out the entrance, fear curdling in her stomach. A few minutes passed, but there was no movement outside, which was both good and bad. Good, because nothing bad had found them yet, and bad because nothing good had happened across them, either.

"Inuyasha," she muttered, fighting the worry in her throat, "you're late."

Behind her, there was the clink of metal on metal, and she heard a small intake of breath. Later, much later, she would remember the sounds in her darker dreams.

"You say you're out of those arrows?" said the boy, and he didn't even sound like himself.

Alarm bells kicking into high gear, Kagome turned around, fear rushing up to wrap around her and weigh her down.

The moment she knew he was gone again took an eternity to play out.

He was standing above her, his eyes dark and empty, the shadow of his bangs falling against his cheeks. Around the handle of his weapon she saw his fingers tighten, whiteness spreading against his skin as he pulled his arm behind his head, bracing his feet firmly on the ground as he wound up to strike the killing blow. Devoid of any passion, or fear, or love, he prepared to make a clean cut.

She knew he was going to kill her.

She would never see her family again, or her friends. She was going to die in a little cave, at the hand of someone who was so far gone he couldn't care if she lived or died. To him, in that moment, she was nothing but an obstacle. She was just an order he had to carry out.

And yet, even as he prepared to kill her, he looked unbearably vulnerable, as though the slightest wind would blow him away, whisk him off into the tiny darkness of the cave.

In her mind, Kagome could imagine his limbs bending beneath a great weight, young and supple, but not supple enough - in her mind, his bones snapped and his heart broke from the things he couldn't remember. Even as he threatened her life, she choked on her compassion. So many memories, hidden away, and if he could but reach them he would be himself again.

As the blade came down, Kagome closed her eyes.

A flash of purple pain and her throat released a scream as her eyes flew open again -

- to see sweat on Kohaku's brow, the blade off to the side, a misfire.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Kagome didn't even wait as terror drove her out of the cave, and down the path, Kohaku following behind, both of them unsure if he could stop himself once again.

* * *

Today, they were going out.

"What are we doing again?" Sesshoumaru asked, very calmly.

Kagome sighed. She'd planned a very short excursion, just to get him used to the streets and the cars and the stench of human beings. "We're going to go buy some food," she informed him again. "So you can go out and about, and become accustomed to the way things are now.

It was all very simple in her head. They would go out, she dressed normally and he with his eyes hidden behind sunglasses and his markings covered, and they would splurge on a few bentos at a grocery store, and maybe she would pick up something special for herself, to make her feel a little more beautiful. She was feeling less and less attractive the more time she spent around Sesshoumaru; despite his fairly clear approval of her appearance, looking at him day in and day out was enough to bring anyone down.

Still, it should be simple. Unfortunately, her companion did not seem to want to cooperate.

"I see. And what is this concoction again?" Sesshoumaru asked, brow arching high into his hair.

Kagome watched as he brought the small pot of stage makeup to his nose and sniffed delicately, like a wine connoisseur inspecting a particularly imperfect vintage, and appearing to find it not only lacking, but insulting. She sighed.

"It's stage makeup," she repeated for the fourth time. "I think this stuff will be thick enough to cover up your... uh... facial markings."

"Hmm," he replied, still staring at the pale, thick cake of paint inside the little tub. He appeared to be in deep thought, as though the secret of the universe would be revealed to him if only he contemplated it just a while longer. Kagome waited almost thirty seconds, and was about to hit her head against a wall when he opened his mouth to bestow his wisdom upon her.

"It isn't white," he said.

In her mind, she gave a long, silent cry of despair. "I know," she ground out, feeling not a little bit exasperated at this second repetition of his unspoken assertion - in his experience, makeup meant for the face was white, and worn by women getting married. With eyes closed so he wouldn't see the roll of annoyance, Kagome hooked a hand underneath the back of one of the kitchen chairs and carried it through the flat and into her bathroom. "But that doesn't matter. Now come in here. I don't know how long this is going to take, and I want to actually take you out of the damn house today."

Plunking the chair down in front of the mirror with as little ceremony as possible, she stomped back out into the living room, brushing her hair away from her face to find him once again delicately sniffing the cosmetics in his hand.

She was tired. Every night she went to bed alone, and every morning she woke up to find that Sesshoumaru had crawled in beside her for reasons he refused to enumerate despite pointed queries. Perhaps he was lonely, or perhaps he liked her, or perhaps he just found the bed more comfortable than the couch. Either way, sleeping in the same - rather small - bed with another person was not as restful as she would have hoped. Whenever he shifted or brushed against her, she would surface briefly in the world of the waking before nudging him gently back to his side of the mattress. She'd never thought she would be such a fussy sleeper, but somewhere between sleeping with Shippou in her bedroll and Sesshoumaru invading her bedroom she had become very particular about how she wanted to sleep, and it didn't include being touched.

Of course, there were other factors that contributed to her sleeplessness. For one thing, he snored. Gently and quietly, with soft snuffling noises every so often, but he snored nonetheless. Kagome secretly postulated that he lost some of his control over his human form when he lost consciousness and assumed the characteristics of a dog as he slept, but she admitted to herself that she was probably just making excuses, since she'd never imagined he'd do something so horribly crass as snoring.

It didn't matter, though. She would have to get used to it, or kick him out of bed, and the latter didn't seem very appealing, despite the hogging and the snoring, because it was still weirdly comforting to have him next to her in the middle of the night. This, she imagined, was what Miyu meant when she talked about friends-with-benefits, though her own situation held a notable lack of the first part of the phrase and a heavy curl of guilt added in, just for good measure.

It had been several days since she and Sesshoumaru had first gone to the rooftop, but they'd returned each night under cover of darkness so he could acclimate himself to the smells of the city and of so many human beings. They spent their days in mostly companionable silence - both of them reading or studying, and each night they would venture to the top of her building. She would spread the blanket on the ground, and they would sit side by side as Sesshoumaru lifted his beautiful face to the sky and breathed deeply.

There had been no repeat of the first night. Instead, they would sit in marginally companionable silence while he sniffed the air, and after a period of anywhere from half an hour to ninety minutes he would slowly stand and move to the stairs, leaving her behind to bundle up the blanket and tuck whatever other effects she had brought underneath her arm and chase after him. He hadn't even touched her again, and that knowledge kept her awake, thinking about it, over and over, well past the time when she should have fallen asleep. She wondered if that had been the last time he would kiss her or run his fingers down her spine and make her tremble. She wondered if their couplings were now a memory, and was both disappointed and relieved. The thought turned her heart to ashes, compounded by the pang of guilt and the hope that she wouldn't have to make her choice again, by the shame of wanting him when she'd loved his

brother. She didn't confuse the two, but he reminded her of when she had been happy. He made her into such a sham, and at the back of her mind was the constant, heavy desire to atone for it, as if she could wipe away their sins somehow.

Ignore it, she thought firmly. Ignore the fact you slept with him, and you can get along with him - not to mention live with yourself - just fine. This does not have to be complicated. Lies, of course, but they made living from minute to minute with his heavy presence bearing down on her just a little bit easier.

"Come on," she said out loud, reaching out to pluck the jar from his fingers before she lost her nerve. "Time to make you pretty."

With a sardonic quirk of his eyebrow, Sesshoumaru walked past her and into the bathroom. Kagome watched as he lowered himself elegantly into the ratty chair, executing a complicated maneuver with his head so that his hair fell behind the back, and looked at her with guarded eyes. The glance made her melancholy.

Kagome tried to stare back with the same wary distrust, so he would know what it felt like.

"Yes?" Sesshoumaru said, eventually.

She shook her head. "Nothing," she replied. "Tilt your chin up."

He did so, not taking his eyes from her.

"All right," she said, and approached him. It always felt awkward to move toward him, since he almost always seemed to exude a certain air that said, very clearly, "do not touch me," but it was necessary.

There was still the problem of covering the tips of his elvish ears, but that, she supposed, would be a bridge to burn when she came to it. All in all, she was just happy she had stage makeup left over from high school.

She uncapped the little jar again and set the lid on the counter. Dipping a finger inside, she worked her fingertip against the hard, pale, flesh-colored cake, gathering as much as possible before drawing it out again and taking a step right up to his seat and running into a slight inconvenience.

"Er," she said.

Sesshoumaru tilted his head very slightly, saying nothing though the corner of his lips twitched very slightly as though he were taunting her. What are you waiting for?

Wow, this is going to be awkward, she thought. She had not, up until this moment, really considered the mechanics of the situation.

He was sitting in typical, stiff-necked Sesshoumaru fashion, his hands resting lightly on his thighs and his back straight. The bathtub flanked his right, and to his left the counter nudged his arm. In the horribly narrow bathroom, there was no way she could move around to his side to

smear on the cosmetics; instead, she would have to lean over him, in close. Which was just not something she did. They could sleep in the same bed and he could invade her space as they slept, but gratuitously touching him had always seemed out of the question. Nevertheless, she thought, this makeup isn't gonna smear itself on.

"Sit still," she commanded, and leaned forward.

His skin was cool and smooth, and she held her breath at the feel of it beneath her fingers, her lips thinning with the conscious effort to control her reaction to him. With careful deliberation that belied her nervousness, Kagome slowly stroked her fingertip down one stripe.

Unfortunately, it wasn't enough - it covered a bit of the base, but faded as she drew it down the full length. Biting her lip, she layered more on her finger and swirled it over the tip of the stripe, trying to blend it in with his skin, trying to keep her mind from the fact that she was unbalanced, her face less than a foot away from his, and his demurely lowered eyes were probably looking straight down her shirt.

It was very quiet in the room; she was once again awkward around him, and her bones felt cold. Kagome clenched her teeth to prevent them from chattering as she concentrated on his face.

Methodically, she finished covering the stripes that graced his cheeks and stood back.

"Right," she said, "if you could lean forward just a - "

So quickly that she didn't even see him move, his hands shot out and grasped her hips, and then she was weightless, tipping into him as he easily scooped her up to straddle his lap before running a burning trail of kisses along her collarbone.

Kagome made a strangled noise, shocked and instantly aroused, noticing crazily that the jar was still clenched in her left hand and her right was held at an odd angle, trying to keep her caked fingers out of his hair even as he dipped his lips hotly into the hollow of her throat.

"Um," she mumbled, struggling to remember all the things that dragged her down, always after, never during.

He'd already slipped beneath her blouse - his hands were sliding up her bare ribs, thumbs lightly skimming over her belly, steadily smoothing his way upwards.

Between her legs, he shifted slightly, the cloth of his trousers rough against the inside of her thighs, and Kagome suddenly remembered.

"No," she said around the heavy thickness of her tongue, "no. Please, don't." It was so hard to say that. How was it possible for it to be so difficult?

With Herculean strength, she rocked backwards, away from the aching sweetness of his mouth, squirming away from the madness of his fingers.

In his chest, she heard a growl rumble darkly as she tried to work her way off his lap, intensely aware that every movement she made only exacerbated her predicament. She swallowed around the lump in her throat. "No."

Sesshoumaru drew back, and for a heart-stopping moment she thought he looked angry, would force her, but he merely frowned slightly and pursed his lips, an action that only reminded her of what she was missing. They look dry, she thought distractedly. For a dizzying moment she almost leaned in and licked them for him, but something told her he would probably not appreciate it. Besides, they hadn't kissed since that first time -

He was still staring at her. Insanely, Kagome felt a flutter of guilt in her stomach for denying him, and then a quick flash of anger at herself. Don't give into him, she thought, and waited for his assessment.

After a moment he tightened his grip on her. "All right," he said quietly, "but stay. It will be easier."

It will be, she thought, yes, it will be. She swallowed, nodding curtly, accepting this perfectly reasonable idea. "Tilt your head back and close your eyes," she commanded.

He did so, and with care, definitely not thinking about the insistent pressure of his body against hers, she smoothed her fingertips over the half-moon on his brow, covering it up, obscuring it from her sight.

"All right, let me stand up," she said when she was finished. She was surprised to find her throat dry, and she swallowed, trying to wet it.

On her hips, she felt his fingers twitch, almost imperceptibly, before he let her go and opened his eyes to watch her clamber off his lap and reach for a compact of powder. "I'm going to put this on - it'll help blend everything with your skin - and then I'll do your hair," she said, her mouth working on autopilot.

"My hair?" he asked.

She gave a half-shrug as she flipped open the compact and ran a brush around the packed powder inside. "It'll help cover your ears," she said. "You'll attract enough attention as it is, I don't want to have to explain to people why your ears are shaped differently. Almost anything else can be explained, but not that."

He arched an eyebrow at that, but said nothing. Kagome smiled as she leaned in again. "Close your eyes," she told him. "Anyway, we didn't have to cover up your face, but it helps. I'm sorry about this."

"This is not something you should regret," he replied as his eyelids slid shut once more.

Kagome froze for a tense moment before blinking rapidly to dispel the strange, creeping sensation that he could read the things she kept hidden in the darker corners of her mind. It wouldn't have been the first time that he said something eerily on the mark, she thought to

herself as she smoothed the powder over the delicate arch of his cheeks. As though he could sniff out the secrets she kept, Sesshoumaru seemed to have an uncanny ability to know what she was thinking.

"You don't have some kind of mind-reading ability, do you?" she asked him suddenly, drawing away to pin him with a frown. It was wasted on him, of course, since his eyes were still closed.

She watched as he snorted silently. "If I did, miko, do you truly think it would be wise to announce that fact?" he asked, the corner of his lip curling upwards. His lips parted, and one fang slipped out.

With his markings covered, the sharpness of his tooth looked unnatural and a little disturbing. He suddenly reminded her of the old, truly atrocious vampire movies she'd seen when she was younger, with the young women in gauzy nighties and the slick, suave vampire who'd lived for hundreds of years and still retained his first pair of fake fangs.

"You'll have to keep your mouth mostly closed," she told him, ignoring his rhetorical question, rolling her worry and newfound discomfort with his fangs around in her mind, trying to get a grip on them both.

His little smirk immediately vanished. "Very well," he acquiesced, and Kagome noted with a vague relief that she couldn't see the barbs of his teeth when he spoke unless she was deliberately looking for the pointed gleam.

"That's good," she said, briskly dusting his face with powder and feeling like a personal consultant at a salon. "Good."

Sesshoumaru said nothing.

Loath to ask him to turn around, Kagome finished her powdering and set it aside before picking up the length of black cord - origin indeterminate - that she'd found beneath the sink. She couldn't imagine what she'd bought it for or why she'd kept it, but she was glad it had been tucked underneath an old make up case and only slightly dusty. Stepping into the bathtub, Kagome circled the demon in the chair before arriving behind him.

His hair brushed the ground. When he had cut it in the cave, he'd apparently chosen his knees as an appropriate length for it, rather than his hips or the middle of his back, despite the fact that either option would have been more practical.

Her fingers found their way to the long shining strands with hesitation - he had not invited her to do so, but neither had he forbidden her - before she crooked the tips and combed downwards.

He had incredible hair. It was cool and fine, yet very heavy. It seemed to order itself, as though it had a mind of its own, rather than fall where it may and become tangled or disheveled. Kagome wondered if he had ever put a brush or comb to it in his entire life, or if it had fallen into perfect order from day one. The prospect didn't seem very fair, but it didn't matter much. All it meant was that she needed only to scoop it out from behind his ears and let it fall over the tips before tying it back.

With as much deftness as she could muster, Kagome turned her fingers toward herself and placed the tips of her nails at his temples.

"I'm just going to pull your hair out from behind your ears," she said, although she couldn't say why she felt the need to tell him so. Perhaps it just seemed too much like fixing something that wasn't broken - trying to improve something that was as perfect as it was going to get - for her to do anything to it without telling him first. Sesshoumaru made no move to answer her, so Kagome worked her fingers up beneath his hair, rubbing against his scalp, and pulled it out, letting it fall where it may to cover the tips of his elvish ears.

Gathering the heavy mass into her hands, Kagome combed it slightly with her fingers, more out of habit than out of any particular need to straighten it out, and pulled it into a low queue at the base of his skull before taking the black cord and wrapping it around the ponytail several times and tying it tightly into place.

"There!" she said, proud of her handiwork. "All done!"

Sesshoumaru rose from the chair and looked at himself in the mirror while Kagome watched. With great delicacy he brought a hand to his now pale, powdered face, and placed his fingers against the arch of his cheekbones, as though seeking the real visage beneath the false one.

"Hmm," was all he said after a moment's perusal.

Kagome felt her mouth twist in discomfort and displeasure. He looked more human now, but he would never pass for someone normal. She was darkly reminded of Inuyasha with his ears tucked beneath a baseball cap or a scarf, his bright red outfit and white hair drawing attention to himself even without his brash, bold attitude and occasional propensity to fall to his knees and sniff out the proper direction he should take. It didn't seem quite fair, really.

A warning to keep his clawed hands mostly out of sight died in her throat. It seemed cruel to tell him to cover up the things that he had been so proud of for so long.

He always disliked humans, was proud of being a youkai. He was in love with his own abilities, with himself, and though he seemed less arrogant now that didn't mean it wouldn't wound him to be forced to make himself into something he was not.

How many times had she tried to stuff his pigheaded brother into the role she wanted? Demanding, angry, pleading, needy...

The bitter irony - that he looked half-human, and half-youkai - struck her full force, like a slap across the mouth. Hanyou, she thought sourly, and wondered what he thought of his new look, if he had made the same connection she had.

Kagome met his inhuman eyes in the mirror, and was ashamed of all the things she had and had not done.

"Come on," she said, her voice echoing with a hollow tone in the tiny tiled bathroom, leeched of color and texture. "We should get going - I'm starting to get hungry." She pushed by him, not caring that she probably jostled him just a little bit, and gathered her purse from her desk.

Sesshoumaru, silent as ever, trailed in her wake.

* * *

Secretly Kagome marveled at Sesshoumaru's seemingly amazing ability to take everything in the world in stride. He'd seen her Honda, so he at least knew of the existence of cars and such things, but she was deeply impressed with the way he seemed to ignore everything around him and stroll down the street as though he'd done it every single day of his life. It was as though he had expected Tokyo, had predicted it when he'd sealed himself away so long ago. She imagined that he hadn't known what would happen, but perhaps with extreme age came the jaded attitude that allowed one to adapt to the world around them without a glitch. That, and he'd been watching television for the past two weeks. That probably had something to do with it, she thought glumly.

She could tell that people were staring at them surreptitiously from the corner of their eyes. She had made the choice to eschew the dark glasses for him, so his golden eyes were still quite visible, but that had not turned out to be as much of a problem as she had thought it would be.

As it turned out, she had also vastly underestimated his icy demeanor; despite the fact that he had kept the arrogance and the cutting looks to an absolute minimum while staying with her in her flat, the moment someone looked at him with anything less than respect Sesshoumaru had let his hair down, as it were.

The moment they'd stepped onto the sidewalk, two middle-aged women had slowed the pace of their strolling to goggle at him, their mouths pinching just a tad, indicating severe disapproval of his hair and his coloring. They probably thought he was some punk who dyed his hair just to look different.

"Freak," one of them had whispered to the other in tones loud enough to be heard in Kyoto.

Mortification crashed over Kagome, but the youkai at her side had been unfazed. It only took the slightest narrowing of his eyes and the displeased twitch of an eyebrow to send the two women packing, both of them clearly a tad unnerved and possibly scandalized. Kagome had been suitably awed.

There was definitely something to be said for Sesshoumaru's charisma. The sheer arrogance that compelled one to look at him also kept one from making a spectacle of oneself while doing so, and they were able to walk the streets without being completely conspicuous and making a scene.

They were walking toward the grocery store now, and Kagome watched Sesshoumaru from the corner of her eye, noting that his nose was twitching slightly. She was intensely curious as to what scent he was seeking amongst the smog and the odor of human beings. She'd never

asked Inuyasha what it was like to have such a powerful sense of smell, but now that she had studied more biology it was beginning to dawn on her that Sesshoumaru knew what it was like to see the world in scent as well as color and form. She made a mental note to ask him when the got home just as they arrived at the grocery store.

"In here," she said lightly, pointing across him with her finger. He gave no indication that he had heard her, merely pivoted swiftly and walked toward the entrance, and Kagome was in the process of turning to follow him when the sliding doors opened. Sesshoumaru stopped in his tracks, still as a statue. Kagome wasn't quick enough.

"Ow!" she exclaimed, stepping back and rubbing a hand over her nose where it had met his shoulder. Damn, she thought. He could be hard as stone when he wanted to be. "What's wrong?" she asked, looking up into his stoic face.

He didn't answer for a moment, but then he jerked his head in a curt dismissal of the question. Kagome supposed that he was just dubious about the doors rather than disturbed by anything significant. Sesshoumaru tossed his head back a little bit and stepped forward again, moving through the doors stiffly before coming to a gentle stop inside the store.

Kagome was worried for a moment until she realized that he was waiting for her to take the lead.

"Here," she said, picking up a little basket. "Let's go find something to eat." He didn't answer, merely trailed silently in her wake as she passed into the produce section.

Pears, she thought. I would die for some pears. No, I'd do more than die for pears, I'd kill someone else for some good pears. Briskly, Kagome walked among the little aisles, passing a critical eye across the rows upon rows of fruits and vegetables arrayed before her before spotting what she wanted near the end of the section. "There!" she said brightly, turning toward Sesshoumaru, who cocked his head. She grinned, shuffled off her reservations, and grabbed his wrist, pulling him along with her to come to a stop in front of the pears.

With practiced hands, Kagome plucked from the pile six ripe, juicy pears, and put them in a plastic bag and twisting the neck together, sealing them in. She could feel Sesshoumaru's interested eyes watching her, learning the subtleties of the supermarket. It made her feel strangely powerful and benevolent, knowing that he was looking to her for the correct way to do things, when before he had always been so confident, so sure of himself.

Just like Inuyasha, she thought idly. Neither of them ever seemed to consider that defeat was an option. She finished tying the bag and set it in her basket.

"Do you want anything in particular?" Kagome asked lightly, looking over her shoulder at him and smiling.

"No," he replied.

She nodded and glanced around for a moment before spying the store-made bentos half an aisle away. "Over here," she told him, jerking her head in the direction. "We'll pick up something

for lunch. And," she announced turning and looking him straight in the eye while he stared back, clearly slightly bemused, "you are definitely going to get one, too. I don't care if you tell me you don't need to eat, you should eat at some point. It's only healthy."

The youkai lifted one shoulder and let it fall back nonchalantly, as if saying that it was of no matter to him, but Kagome was determined. "Come on," she said, turning and walking away from him with a spring in her step. "You have to try them. I love their chicken."

"Very well," he said from behind her, voice heavy and weary, making it abundantly clear that he was merely humoring her, but Kagome was finding herself lighter than she had felt in days, or months, or years. In her head, she pretended that they were the best of friends, or lovers, two people who cared about each other just doing a bit of shopping together. Something completely mundane and normal that friends and lovers did together all the time. Happily, she showed him the different kinds of food they could get and recommended the chicken, to which he grudgingly acquiesced and she put them in her basket.

Together they walked down the aisles, Kagome picking out potato chips and little boxes of instant ramen and soup, things she remembered that Inuyasha and Shippou had loved, and grabbing some candy on an impulse, tossing it all in her little basket until the metal handles bit into her fingers and she had to shift it to both hands lest she drop it. Through it all, Sesshoumaru watched her with a bemused expression on his face, his hands shoved into his pockets and his beautiful mouth tilted in a smirk. Kagome wondered if he knew how tempting he looked.

The only thing that was at all distracting was the number of people peeking at them from behind displays, and she could hear slight whispers skittering back and forth, too soft for her to pick up, though she had no doubt that Sesshoumaru could hear every word spoken. She tried to take his lead and ignore them.

It didn't matter that people were staring at them, she decided as she tucked a large package of tea into the overflowing basket. It had been so long since she stood out so much, simply by association with someone else, but she found that she was slipping back into the role of guide through modern Tokyo with surprising ease. She chattered, Sesshoumaru answered with long looks, curt gestures, or monosyllabic utterances, and people could stare all they liked. It wasn't like she was doing anything wrong.

Finally Kagome glanced down into the basket and decided that she was definitely going to regret her purchases later, but for some reason just couldn't bring herself to care at the moment. She'd worry about rent when it came.

"I think it's probably time to check out," she announced, as though bringing an end to their excursion was a grave matter. "I'm starving."

Sesshoumaru didn't answer, and Kagome glanced in his direction.

Instead of staring at her with a vague, amused smirk and puzzled face, he suddenly looked alert and suspicious, narrowed eyes glancing off to his right, as though he could see over his

shoulder. Concerned, Kagome brushed her fingers against his arm. Sesshoumaru jerked his head toward her sharply.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, mildly alarmed.

He gave another curt shake of the head. "It is nothing with which you need concern yourself," he retorted, straightening his posture slightly, shedding the subconsciously assumed defensive position. Then, to her utter surprise, he extended a hand and lightly touched her back in a weirdly possessive gesture, as though ushering her through a door as any chivalrous gentleman would do. It was so out of character for him that Kagome almost stepped away from him, only controlling the impulse at the last second. Instead of demanding to know what he was talking about, she just frowned slightly and walked toward the check out line, the demon at her back like a flanking army.

She had meant to show him how to pay for things, but to her chagrin he seemed distracted, eyes constantly fluttering to the side, in the direction of the back of the store. He looked as though he was struggling to keep his mind on the task at hand as she handed her items to the cashier, but something kept dragging his attention away from her. Kagome found that she didn't like that.

"Miss?"

Startled, she jerked her attention away from Sesshoumaru and refocused on the smiling, elderly woman in front of her. "What? Oh," she said, hastily bowing her head and digging in her purse for her money. A little twang went through her, just a touch of shame for her extravagance, as she passed over a handful of cash. The elderly woman beamed and bowed, passing back her change, and Kagome gathered her bags over her arm.

"Hey," she said softly, reaching out and tugging on Sesshoumaru's sleeve. The youkai quickly refocused on her, a slightly startled look on his face, before starting forward and falling into step behind her as they exited the store. This time, Kagome was relieved to see that he didn't react adversely to the automatic doors, merely strode through them, mind a million miles away, and turned in the direction of home.

He wasn't hurrying as such, but she was suddenly finding it difficult to catch up to him. "Hey!" she exclaimed after a minute of working her feet like crazy, annoyed to find herself out of breath. "Is there something wrong? Where's the fire?"

Casting her a look of annoyance, the demon slowed in his pace, but kept his strides even and long as she drew up alongside him. "There is no fire," he said.

"I wasn't being literal," she snapped breathlessly. "I just wanted to know why you're suddenly walking so quickly. And don't - " she frowned, " - give me that crap about how its not my concern." Her brow was drawn down in a thunderous frown. There was nothing she hated more than being left in the dark.

Sesshoumaru slowed even more as he gave her a calculating look down the length of his patrician nose, as though adding up her merits and subtracting her flaws in his mind, and the answer would tell him whether or not she was worthy of hearing his concern. Finally his lips twisted.

"We are being followed," he told her quietly.

Kagome felt cold. "Human or youkai?" she asked automatically.

Sesshoumaru gave her a withering glare. "Human," he said, and she could hear the sharp rebuke in his tone. She bit her lip with the effort it took to not snap back.

"Male or female?" she demanded.

She heard him take an experimental whiff of the air. "Male," he said.

"Hmm," Kagome replied and looked at the ground as it passed beneath her feet. Who is it? What could they want? If it's a friend of mine, why don't they approach me? Visions of underground government youkai study facilities flashed through her mind before she shoved the thought away with a flash of annoyance at her wild imagination. You watch too many stupid movies, she told herself. Still, she had no idea why anyone would follow them, unless they were either intensely interested in either herself or the demon with her.

A shudder of nervous energy skittered its tiny paws up her spine, and Kagome shivered a little bit, not out of any concrete concerns, but simply because of the knowledge that she was being followed. Anything dogging her footsteps was enough to make her wary. She bit her lip.

And then a hand was sliding across her shoulders as Sesshoumaru pulled her into his body in a gesture even more intensely possessive than the one he had executed in the store. Kagome nearly bit through her tongue in surprise.

"What - ?"

"Do not worry," he said, voice low and rich, his body warm and his breath across her ear even warmer. "He will not touch you."

In her veins, Kagome felt her blood slow to a stop. Beneath her feet, the world opened up and she fell through.

"Shut up! I'm saying I'll protect you!" Inuyasha shouted.

In that strange half-world, perched on the towering bones of Inuyasha's father, Kagome was suddenly shocked into silence. High above, the huge white shape of Sesshoumaru's true form towered over them, his footsteps shaking the skeleton on which they stood.

Seemingly unperturbed by poisonous death just a few feet away, Inuyasha turned away from her, exasperated by her tears. "Just stay there," he snapped, shouldering the rusty katana. "I'll handle this."

Sesshoumaru was guiding her toward the stairs to her flat, his touch stealing her breath, the warmth of his body slowing her blood. He was killing her.

Memory is not for you and me, he'd said, and it was true. She was choking on it. It filled her throat, clogged her lungs like mud, killing her so slowly she wasn't entirely certain she was still alive.

I'm dreaming this, she thought as her fingers fumbled with the keys when she opened the door. Sesshoumaru was towering over her, shielding her from the sight of their invisible follower.

Once they were both inside she closed it and locked it behind them.

Why would anyone follow me? Wearily, Kagome slumped, letting her forehead come to rest against the cool wood of the door, trying to order her thoughts. Are we in danger?

Behind her, Kagome heard a rustling noise, and she turned to see Sesshoumaru sloughing off his shirt and tossing it carelessly on the sofa. He was looking at her with his inscrutable face.

"I told you there was no need to worry," he said. "There is no one who can stand against me."

Kagome shook her head, feeling tired. "That's not it," she replied. "You just reminded me of something - "

Her words dried up.

Of what? she thought. His brother that he didn't like? The past? Things that mean nothing to him? He was staring at her, waiting for her to continue.

Kagome forced a half-smile. " - of something I would rather forget."

Sesshoumaru nodded before turning away and selecting a book from the small pile he'd stacked next to the couch and settling in. Kagome went into the kitchen and began to put away her purchases, but she found no joy in them now. She felt like she was on a roller coaster, constantly swooping between highs and lows, peaking and crashing with depressing frequency, and she couldn't tell if it was better or worse than the grey plateau she had wandered before she had freed the youkai lord from his mountain cave.

Would I rather forget? she wondered, hands running on automatic as she put away the ramen and the potato chips - things bought on a nostalgic whim, things on which she now wished she had not wasted her time or her thoughts - into ordered piles in the cupboards. Would I rather not have these memories?

What would it be like to live her life, free of the things that weighed heavy? What if she could date a boy and not constantly remember the first boy she had loved, the first one she had cared about, who had been stolen from her? What if the memory of a little kitsune didn't pluck at her heart each time she saw a little boy with light brown hair? What if the ghosts of a huntress and a monk didn't haunt her, didn't remind her of all the love and understanding she'd once had?

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

There had been a time, once, long ago, when she didn't wake up in the morning haunted by things past. There had been a time when she hadn't been ruined for love, or friendship, or purpose. There had been a time when she had been bright, brave Kagome, doing the right thing because good things happened to good people. Once, she had been, if not happy, then at least capable of being happy.

But that was a long time ago, and she could no longer remember who she had been.

* * *

It had been so long since someone had called her that Kagome almost loosed her bladder when her phone rang that evening, and she spent a frantic twenty seconds trying to locate in which corner of her flat she'd plugged it in, a display Sesshoumaru seemed to find highly amusing. She heard him snort as she picked it up at the last second in the kitchen and sent him a glare.

He just smirked back.

"Kagome?"

Startled, Kagome recognized the voice of Kayoko, sounding scratchy over the cellular airwaves. "Kayoko? Yeah, it's me? What's up?"

There was silence at the other end of the line. It dragged out so long that Kagome thought her phone had cut out. "Kayoko?" she said again.

"Yeah, I'm here. Sorry, I was just, um..."

Kagome pulled the charging cord out of her phone and let it fall onto the kitchen counter top. "What's wrong?" she asked, suddenly worried as she walked into the living room. Sesshoumaru was looking at her curiously from his perch on the couch, the book he was currently reading - bizarrely, on modern kenjutsu - lying limp and forgotten in his hands. Kagome settled in beside him as Kayoko laughed on the other end of the line.

"This sounds so stupid now that I'm talking to you," she said. "But Miyu-chan called me up this morning and said she had a fight with Yoshi-kun because he wanted to kick your new boyfriend's ass, and I said, 'there's no way Kagome has a new boyfriend and didn't tell us,' but she said one of Yoshi-kun's friends saw you in a store with some punk-looking guy with white hair, and that he went home with you!"

So this is what a train wreck feels like, Kagome thought distantly to herself. She was beginning to become acquainted with the phrase "bitter irony," with rather more familiarity than she had ever wanted.

Great, I try to keep my life and my past separate, and now it's all crashing down because I just couldn't leave well enough alone.

Kayoko was still chattering on. " - so I told her that if his friend thought the guy looked scary there was no way Yoshi-kun was going to be able to take him since he's such a wimp anyway, and she got mad at me! Can you believe that?"

Kagome forced herself to respond. "Not at all," she said.

"Plus she's mad at you, because Yoshi-kun's jealous, but that doesn't make any sense at all. So I told her to buy some ice cream and take a bath and call me back when she was in a better frame of mind. So if she calls you or shows up, don't be surprised."

"Shows up?" Kagome blurted suddenly, panic raising the volume of her voice.

Kayoko laughed. "What, she shows up at your door all the time! What makes now any different..." Her voice trailed off, and Kagome had to force her self to refrain from hanging up right then before she gave away anything else.

"Kagome? You don't actually have a new boyfriend, do you?"

"No!" she answered, too forcefully. She was never very good at lying.

"Oh my god, you do have a new boyfriend! How exciting! Is he the guy Yoshi-kun's friend saw, or is he different? Is he there right now? When do we get to meet him?"

"Kayoko - "

"Come on, Kagome! We've all had a standing bet for years as to when you'd get a new boyfriend," her friend replied. "And I think I won."

"Wait, you guys have had a pool going?"

There was a pause at the other end of the line. Kayoko coughed.

"Just a little one."

Kagome almost did hang up right then. "What the hell?" she nearly shouted.

"Oh relax. It was all in good fun. Why do you think we kept trying to set you up with the available guys in our classes?"

"I thought you were trying to distract me so I wouldn't break the curve," Kagome retorted. She was pissed off now. Some friends, she thought.

"Yeah, well, that would have been a bonus," Kayoko said flippantly.

Kagome gritted her teeth. "And I don't have a boyfriend," she stated flatly. "So no, you didn't win your bet."

"Oh," Kayoko said, disappointment palpable even over the phone. "So who was that guy that went into your flat with you?"

Kagome thought fast. "He's the brother of a guy I used to know back in high school. He needed a place to stay, so I said yes." That's at least partially true, she thought, hoping the grain of truth would be enough to keep the lie from her voice.

"Half-brother," Sesshoumaru cut in. Kagome shot him a look full of daggers.

"Was that him?" Kayoko demanded from the other end of the line. "He sounds cute. Is he single?"

Kagome choked.

It was amazing, really. Kayoko couldn't have hurt her more if she had tried.

For some reason, the thought of sharing Sesshoumaru with someone else, of him touching someone else after her - there had to be those before her, but they were in the past, the past that he didn't think of - made her see red. It was like a knife through her belly.

"No." The word felt forced out between her teeth, like it had come from somewhere dark and deep. Don't touch him, she thought with a ferocity that scared her, that made her hate herself even more, but she couldn't stop her thoughts. She might as well have tried to stop an earthquake.

Stay away, don't come near him, leave us alone, don't come near him, this is for me, this is mine, mine, all mine, this is mine -

She felt like she was going to cry. There was a knot in her throat so large it was a wonder she could even breathe around it, and in her chest was a chain pulled so tight she could feel it constrict with every pump of her heart.

Sesshoumaru was prying her hand away from her face - when had she placed it on her cheek? - and weaving his fingers through her hair, drawing close to her.

"Kagome?" Kayoko said, sounding tinny on the other end of the line. "Is everything okay? Are you feeling well?"

And suddenly Sesshoumaru's long, clawed fingers were moving smoothly and slowly over her other hand, gently pulling the phone from her grasp, and she couldn't breathe so she let him take it from her and bring it to his face. He held the phone perfectly, as though he were familiar with it, as though he belonged in an era of such things.

"She is well," he said coolly into the mouthpiece. "Leave her alone."

Through the dull roar in her ears, Kagome could hear Kayoko squawking, demanding something - to talk to her, for Sesshoumaru to be more polite, for his phone number, it didn't really matter - and he handed the little cell phone back to her. She understood, then, that he didn't know what to do with it now, and in truth, she didn't know either.

With trembling fingers, Kagome closed it, and set it deliberately on the floor.

For a moment the silence between them grew palpable and thick, and the only thing she could hear was her frantic breath. Fearing what she would see, she looked up.

Sesshoumaru was standing in front of her, staring at her. "What is a boyfriend?" he asked.

As though the words were a tether, she was anchored again. Kagome swallowed thickly, as her panic subsided and she cast about for an answer. "A boyfriend is..." She tried to think of a term he would know, found one.

"If you were... courting me... you would be my boyfriend."

She couldn't tell what he made of this. He only said, "Hm," as though the information had no bearing on him, as though he were only an interested bystander. Suddenly, horribly, Kagome wondered if he was courting her, but just didn't know how to go about it, or if he was following some strange youkai courting rules about which she had no clue. The thought mortified her.

She had to know. The need was pressing, immediate. "You're not... you're not courting me, are you?" she asked, afraid he would say yes, afraid he would say no.

He was still as stone for a long moment. Then he moved.

Before her, Sesshoumaru sank down, never taking his eyes from hers, and placed his hands on her legs, trailing long fingers up the back of her calves, over the tender flesh on the underside of her knees. Just the caress of his fingertips sent a frisson of desire bolting straight down her spine, burning through her belly to come to a smoldering stop between her legs, as though his mere touch were connected directly to her brain.

Her eyes fluttered and she let out a shuddering breath as her hands clenched convulsively.

Sesshoumaru leaned in, fingers moving upward, coming to rest on the lowest button of her blouse. As though he had all the time in the world, he leaned forward, face filling her field of vision, lips drawing near to hers.

She was positive that he was going to kiss her, soothe her, but at the last possible second, when his lips were only a hair's breadth away, he slid to the side, bringing the flat, high planes of his cheek so close to hers that she could feel the pressure of the air between them.

His breath curled across her ear.

How can this be? she thought, head fuzzy, heart fluttering between her ribs like a bird caged. How can I feel like this?

He had undone the first button, and she felt his hands brush against the fabric of her shirt, moving slowly to the next, parting her clothing with agonizing slowness as he kept his face just mere millimeters from hers.

Kagome sat, very still, legs clamped together, fingers clenched around the edge of the sofa cushion, and silently begged him to touch her. She didn't think she had the courage to do it herself.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

He would live for so long, and she would be a memory after he left. He would take her and lock her away in his mind, never to think of her again, unless she were blurred, aborted, unless he could erase her ending.

He would touch others after she, and she couldn't tell if she meant everything or nothing to him in this moment.

In her mind, Kagome nocked an arrow, screamed his name, and pinned him to a tree, never to wake again. He would be forever frozen, asleep and dreaming, never to leave.

Another button popped out of its hole.

He moved to the next.

Kagome was dying.

She could hear his soft exhalations. His breath was picking up pace, unraveling at the edges, his clothing - but not his body, not the hard muscles and fiery skin she wanted - skimmed against her knees, and she could feel, so slightly, almost imperceptibly, his fingers shaking.

His fingers were shaking.

Kagome's mouth watered.

He was holding back, but he wanted her so badly he was trembling.

Why? she thought. Oh, god, why me?

He freed another button.

She thought of him, in his slumber of the ages, sealed in a cave, never to see the light of day again. Who really sealed him? - but it didn't matter, that was the past, and she longed to close his eyes and quench his breath and live on behind his moonkissed brow, in his sleep of eternity.

Her shirt was half-way undone, and as she imagined his still form he moved onto the next, nestled in the little valley between her breasts, and, almost by accident, the backs of his fingers brushed against her.

Kagome ignited.

With a soft cry, she launched herself off the couch, sliding her legs around his hips, seeking him through the layers of fabric that separated them, hands fastening themselves in his hair.

Her lips found his throat, mouth open as though she were going to consume him, swallow him alive.

Beneath her lips, she felt the vibration of his throat before she even heard him moan, and then he was flipping her over, bringing her to rest on the carpet beneath his heavy weight, but

Kagome didn't care because he was pressed darkly into the space between her legs. She groaned and lifted her hips, desperate, aching for him, rubbing herself against him.

Her hands were still tangled in his long, silver hair, falling down around them like waters. He flexed his hips and disengaged her hand from the base of his skull, pushing her down with his other hand. Staring into her eyes, Sesshoumaru dipped his head and planted a kiss in the center of her palm, then opened his mouth and swirled his tongue over the skin there.

Kagome gave a strangled sigh as he lowered himself over her and then to her right, curling around her on his side as one hand unbuttoned his trousers, the other guiding her hand to his erection.

In her hand, he was so hot and hard she thought she would die if she didn't draw him into her in that moment, but as her fingers wrapped around him, moving the burning skin over his hard length, she looked down.

Beneath her gaze, Sesshoumaru quivered. She watched in fascination as his hips thrust into her hand, the muscles of his stomach barely visible but just visible enough that she could see them clench beneath his skin, beneath the weight of his need. She could see the moisture at the tip.

I wonder... she thought muzzily.

Without stopping to reconsider, Kagome slipped down his body, extended an eager tongue, and tasted him.

Sweet.

Sesshoumaru gasped and jerked away.

Fear gripped her. "I'm sorry, I've never - " she babbled sitting up, drawing away from him, humiliated. "I didn't mean - did I hurt you?" She turned her eyes from him, suddenly embarrassed and shy, hands flying to her blouse and pulling it shut, tugging down on her skirt.

And then claws on her shoulders were bearing her down, pushing her skirt over her hips, freeing her of her panties.

"No, that was fine," he murmured, panting into her hair, and then his erection, slick with precum and her own saliva, was pressing against her entrance, and then he was sliding into her - funny, it seemed so easy now, so quick as he spiraled in to rest against her - fingers dancing on her stomach, and her hands found his hips and pressed him to her.

He began to move, and Kagome, drunk with him, with his scent, with his body, with promises of eternity, didn't even bother to repeat her question.

Sesshoumaru pinned her to the ground, and never answered.

* * *

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

There once was a wolf prince.

Kouga had black hair and sky blue eyes and even though Kagome knew he had killed many human beings - the scent of their blood clung to him and his pack like the sickly sweet smell of decay on a corpse - she still found him sweet and endearing. He seemed strangely sincere in his affections for her, even though he didn't even know anything about her much beyond the fact that she was a human being with extraordinary powers - the powers to see the shards of the Shikon no Tama.

Those damn powers made her a premium commodity, it seemed. Not even Kikyou could tell where the fragments had fallen, but Kagome had always been able to tell; that was how she met Kouga in the first place, after all. She'd rashly shouted out to Inuyasha that the wolf demon's incredible speed stemmed from the fragments in his legs, and his strength from the one in his arm, and so the wolf had stolen her away to his cave to help him root out his enemies and destroy them.

But he'd always been, if not gentle, then at least not rough with her. He'd handled her like the important prize she was, both fragile and resilient, both human and something ever so slightly more, and when he ran across their path he always grabbed her hands warmly, declared his love, and pissed Inuyasha off something awful.

High above her, the sun had shone down through the trees, dappling the ground and her companions with light and shadow. Kagome was grateful for the shade. It was a particularly warm and humid late summer day, and pushing her bike was becoming more of a chore than she'd thought possible. In her basket, Shippou snoozed gently, oblivious to the labor it required to ferry him around.

Lip curling, Kagome tried to be mad at the little kitsune.

It didn't work. Shippou muttered something about candy and "stupid Inuyasha", swatted at the air with a tiny little hand, and turned over, obviously deeply embroiled in some fantastic dream wherein he finally bested the hanyou without her help.

It was adorable really.

Kagome was toying with the idea of leaning down and tickling him awake so she would have someone to talk to when something unscrewed her brain and sent her falling.

"Oh!" she exclaimed.

Ahead of her, Miroku and Sango stopped and turned back to look at her, while Inuyasha kept on walking, oblivious.

"What is it, Kagome-chan?" Sango inquired, eyebrows raised.

Kagome opened her mouth. "Two shikon - " was as far as she got before a wind whipped through her hair and her fingers were warmly trapped by two rough, brown hands.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Blue eyes beamed down at her.

"Yo!" Kouga exclaimed jovially.

"Kouga-kun!" was all she could think to say. At her side, her bike, no longer supported, slowly tipped over in slow motion and tipped the sleeping kitsune out onto the ground. Shippou woke up with a squeal of outrage.

"Kagomeeee!" he yelled. "Inuyasha's picking on me!"

Always a little slow on the uptake, Inuyasha was stalking back toward them. "No I didn't, and get away from her you stupid wolf!"

"It's okay, Shippou-chan!" Kagome turned, trying to tug her hands from Kouga's to no avail. "It was my fault, I'm sorry!"

She turned back to Kouga to see him assessing the damage to Shippou with a critical eye. Apparently finding nothing amiss, he turned back to her with a grin that flashed his feral teeth.

"Ne, Kagome, how have you been?" Kouga asked, tugging her closer, ignoring Shippou's whimpering with an airy disregard that Kagome found she envied, just a little bit.

On the early autumn air, she caught his odor drifting toward her, and Her nose tickled with his scent - he always smelled strongly of some heavy, animalistic musk that reminded her just how wolfish he really was whenever, despite his strange eyes and sharp teeth and pointed ears, she was in grave danger of forgetting.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Inuyasha advancing like a vengeful red ghost. "Hey, wimpy wolf, what the hell are you doing? Get the fuck away from her!"

Why does he always act possessive around Kouga? she thought despairingly. What a jerk! As if the only time he feels like he should hang onto me is when he's threatened! Boys. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more it seemed unfair.

Don't I deserve someone who'll treat me like Kouga-kun does all the time? she speculated. The obvious answer of defecting to Kouga's little tribe considered crossing her mind, but something kept her from entertaining the possibility.

Inuyasha was still yelling. Kagome was feeling tired.

"Osuwari," she said authoritatively.

Inuyasha went crashing to the ground in a bone crushing lunge that normally would have made Kagome cringe in sympathy. Unfortunately for Inuyasha she was not in the most forgiving of moods.

"I'm doing well, Kouga-kun," she said brightly, and was rewarded with the widening of his happy grin and the tightening of his hands on her own.

"Good to hear, Kagome," he replied. "Good to know this weak little puppy isn't letting you get hurt. Don't worry, Kagome. Once I've defeated Naraku, you'll never have to listen to him howling ever again."

And that was it.

Inuyasha climbed to his feet and made a disoriented swipe at the wolf prince, who immediately leapt out of the way and off to the side, away from her, allowing Inuyasha to place himself between the two in a protective stance. He always did that, as though he were afraid that Inuyasha would accidentally misfire, and wanted to get as far away from her as possible.

She wasn't an idiot. She could see his moves, knew that he trusted Inuyasha to care enough about her to refrain from injuring her deliberately, but didn't trust him enough to put faith in his moves.

He always dashed away from her in order to protect her.

Kagome shifted uncomfortably, painfully aware that even as she took comfort in Kouga's advances, even as she felt beautiful and wanted, she was leading him on.

She didn't care about him the way he cared about her, as shallow and whimsical as the feeling he held for her was. She felt ashamed, and sad, less worthy of him, which was stupid, since she couldn't control how he felt about her, and vice versa. If he could, she would have left her friends long ago and joined with Kouga and his pack, seeking shards for them, and them alone.

It was funny how fragile the fate of the Shikon no Tama really was. The only thing that really stood between its completion for nefarious purposes and its purification was her sense of right and wrong. If she had become infatuated with the wrong person, had fallen haphazardly into the wrong story, she would have become the instrument of something less than pure.

How strange that it should be like this, her with the hanyou, balanced between the two choices when the choice was obvious, rather than caught with a good youkai or an evil human. How strange that she should be trapped inside this story in this way.

How strange that she should be herself, when all around conspired to bend her to something else.

But she was making the right choice. Inuyasha could heal the rift caused by the Shikon's creation and shattering. He could become human, could purify it because she could help him. Because of her, the jewel would disappear, never to plague the world again.

How funny that its fate was so fragile, but she would make the right choice.

Kouga loved her without reason, of that she had no doubt.

But he still wasn't enough, and that was enough to break her heart.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Chapter 3

"Don't you ever get restless, just sitting around here?" Kagome asked several days later. The time was nearing midnight and she was stretched out on her stomach on the floor, idly doodling on a page of graph paper torn from the back of one of her lab books. She watched with a strange, detached interest as her pen moved across the crisp surface; behind it a long trail of ink unfurled like an endless flag. The television was flashing blue frames across the room and on the walls.

Sesshoumaru, messily dressed in his yukata and his hair nearly dried from his bath, was sprawled on the couch and staring at the television with drowsy eyes and a face so still it was difficult to tell if he was still awake or had fallen asleep with his eyes open.

For a moment he didn't respond and she thought he had in fact lost consciousness, until he stirred and the strange calm was broken, as though she had thrown a pebble into a smooth, glasslike pond. He slowly drew himself up to prop his head on his hand, like ripples moving across his still, eternal form.

"Why, miko?" he murmured. "Does it upset you to think I might be unsatisfied?"

The double-entendre, intentional or accidental, was not lost on her, and she squirmed, slightly uncomfortable. Looking back down, she saw that on the paper in front of her the line she was drawing was wavering, taking unconscious dictation from her embarrassed mind. Kagome stopped drawing and readjusted her grip. "Not really," she told him, concentrating on the paper and the pen in her hand. "But I would be a poor hostess if I did not ask you, every once in a while, if you were content with the state of affairs."

In between her answer and Sesshoumaru's response, she replayed what she had just said. Content with the state of affairs? she thought, her own voice playing flatly in her mind. I'm even starting to talk like him. She couldn't decide if this bothered her, or if she was content to be influenced. As though the volume had been turned up, the dull, muted noise of the television - some sort of inane jingle for dish detergent - danced on her nerves, and Kagome felt the muscles in her back tightening over one another in a knot of stress.

The space between them was beginning to grow again. She wondered if Sesshoumaru took a sadistic sort of pleasure in making her wait for his answers, rather than doing the courteous thing and replying right away. It was not the sort of thing she would put past him, but then again he was direct in his dealings. He dealt in taunts and threats, just like his brother. It was entirely possible, she supposed, that he took no particular joy in making her wait; it was entirely possible that he chose to think about his responses before putting them out in the open. As a creature that had lived centuries, he had probably learned to be patient.

Then again, he might have forgotten all about her. Human things, brief things, probably held little interest.

Kagome's fingers tightened around the pen, idly observing in the blue light of the television the way the skin of her fingertips turned violet and azure instead of red and white.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

The fact that Sesshoumaru could still wind her tight as a drum was a marvel. Even after a few scant weeks traveling with Inuyasha she had been able to see what made him tick and discover some of the secrets that kept him angry and isolated from the rest of the world, and it was only the distance that spanned between her love and his loyalty that kept them at odds and occasionally angry at each other. Even then they could work it out by yelling and the occasional, well-placed "osuwari." How odd that even now she couldn't imagine raising her voice to Sesshoumaru - not because she hadn't thought about it, but because it still seemed suicidal.

Kagome felt even more peeved. At least with Inuyasha I didn't have to worry about getting my head melted off if I got angry at him. If Inuyasha were still alive, we would be yelling up a storm right now.

In her hand, the pen slowed to a stop. If Inuyasha were still alive... she thought again, and felt something heavy and dark slump around her heart, though she couldn't identify the feeling. Strangely, in her head, she felt only emptiness at that passing notion.

If Inuyasha were still alive, she thought, exploring the texture of the idea, I might have little quarter youkai babies right now. If Inuyasha were still alive, I probably wouldn't be in medical school. If Inuyasha were still alive, I'd blow off all my steam by fighting with him, and I wouldn't feel so tangled up in knots. A faint smile graced her lips; it was like a game, if she could ignore that queer heavy weight inside the cage of her body.

Let's see, she thought, if Inuyasha were alive, I wouldn't have said, 'I would be a poor hostess if I didn't ask you if you were content with the state of affairs.' I would have said, 'I'm just trying to be nice, you jerk.'

And Inuyasha would have said, 'I don't need you to be nice to me, I can take care of myself.'

And I would have said, 'Fine, I won't be nice ever again.'

And Inuyasha would have said, 'Fine!'

And I would have told him, 'That means no more special meals!'

And then we would have argued and felt a lot better or a lot worse, depending on the outcome and whether or not Miroku and Sango were around to smooth things over.

With care, Kagome let her head fall to the side, feeling the bones in her neck crack beneath the tension she had managed to build up merely from sprawling on the floor and speaking to the youkai on her sofa. If only she felt comfortable enough to fight with him, or he felt compelled to argue back, rather than rip her head off, life would be easier.

But we don't fight, she thought. Instead of fighting, we fuck.

That seemed to be the crux of it, except that it wasn't. Where she and Inuyasha could have done the same had it not been for the way their time together was aborted, or for the endless, agonizing albatross of Kikyou, she and Sesshoumaru came together in the dark and tumbled

over each other, tangled limbs and lips, without love or hate or even any sort of mutual respect. There was something else to it, and Kagome didn't know what it was. She was afraid to study her emotions too closely, lest she find something stronger than her love for Inuyasha there.

Strange how easy it was now to stuff the guilt of betraying Inuyasha down into the dusty corners of her soul. Strange how she had felt the same when dating other men, but now it seemed so inconsequential next to other things.

Sighing, Kagome pressed her fingertips to her brow very softly, hoping to draw out the headache she could feel curling behind her eyes, coiled like a snake ready to strike.

"Perhaps," Sesshoumaru spoke, startling her out of her reverie, "you are the one who is restless, and you wish for me to feel the same?"

Blinking, Kagome realized that she had been staring straight at the same spot on her paper for more than a minute. She turned her head to look at him, feeling the sting of salt water replenishing her eyes. "That's not true, I don't want you to be restless," she said without thinking.

Without actually doing so, Sesshoumaru gave her the impression that he had heaved an exasperated sigh, and she could hear his unspoken chastisement: do not be so dense, miko.

Twisted up in frustrated annoyance again, she chewed her lip. "Well," she conceded, "perhaps I want you to be a little restless. It does get a bit boring around here."

"It grows boring everywhere," he replied, slowly pushing himself into a sitting position, like the rise of a slow motion mountain range. "Sooner or later, everything loses its fascination."

Consternation. "Not books," she said as he stood up; she rolled onto her side and propped her head on her hand in order to follow his movements. "There's always more books to read." He had told her that himself only a few days ago when she had asked him whether or not he'd thought the world had grown more interesting since he'd sealed himself in the cave, and he'd replied that the world had certainly grown more loquacious. That, at least, was an improvement.

Sesshoumaru padded across the floor to stand next to her, and she tipped all the way over onto her back, feeling nervous and slightly aroused merely from his dominant stance and her supine position. He looked down at her in the dancing blue light.

"Sooner or later, one reads all the books worth reading," he said, giving her a critical look. "And then the rest are books one has read without reading, or that say things that are not new, or are inconsequential. No, books grow old, eventually."

"Fighting?" she suggested.

He snorted softly, and knelt down on one knee next to her. "Fighting loses its luster once one is the best."

Kagome tried not to look at the long seam of his yukata that pulled open between his knees, revealing the calf and the posterior curve of a muscled thigh. His silver hair was a pale blue in the light.

"Conversation," she said quickly. "Conversation doesn't get boring."

"Hmm," he remarked softly. "I suppose that it could be of interest." The way he said it seemed leaden. Kagome, stretched out on the rough carpet, stared up at him and wondered how well the years distilled knowledge of the world. How long would it take for everything to become old? she mused sadly. How long before even diversions become repetitive?

In the azure light of the darkened room, Sesshoumaru gazed down at her, and she up at him, and she could not read his face, nor the thoughts that lay hidden behind it.

Then, without preamble, Sesshoumaru scooped her up into his arms, rose, pivoted, and walked the few paces to the couch before depositing her on the cushions. It happened so quickly that she only found the time to make a surprised squeak when she hit the sofa, rolling into the cozy space where the back cushions met the seat.

"Whoah, what -?" she said, inanely.

Sesshoumaru lowered himself onto the couch, so smoothly it seemed he was caught in a controlled fall. She was half on her side, facing him as he slid a knee between hers and tucked her into the curve of his body, hiding his face in the crook of her neck and sliding an arm up her side to rest a clawed hand on her breast.

Despite the frequency with which this sort of thing seemed to occur, Kagome was shocked into silence as he curled around her and burrowed deep into the hollow created by the arch of her throat and the curve of her shoulder, breath stirring her hair. He lay half on top of her, hips against her thigh and firm leg lying heavily between her own, the hard planes of his chest pressed into her belly. He felt good and warm, and the weight of his hand on her breast felt only comforting through the thin fabric of her shirt.

He didn't seem inclined to pursue anything either, as though she were sexless. Kagome stared at the ceiling and concentrated on the soft puffs of air that curled against her neck and the spreading, relaxing warmth he provided.

After a moment, she laid a hand against his waist and closed her eyes, turning her head toward his.

She was nearly asleep when Sesshoumaru spoke.

"If it will please you, miko, you may plan an excursion," he said. "You need not worry on my account."

Kagome was instantly awake. If it would please me? she wondered. I need not worry? Is he just humoring me? Does he mean it?

She didn't know what to think. Against her stomach, she felt Sesshoumaru take a deep breath and then exhale slowly, relaxing against her.

But she was alert again, tense again, unsure why he would say such a thing. Did he care? Did he just want to keep the peace? Did he feel indebted to her? It was so difficult to know, and she would have to guess, because asking him was out of the question.

Annoyed, Kagome was suddenly resentful of his cool presence, of the weird comfort he brought her, of the way he had slipped so poisonously into her little life. If Inuyasha were alive, she thought, I wouldn't have to guess, and I wouldn't have to ask. I would know.

Sesshoumaru shifted against her, a long tendril of silver hair tumbling down to rest upon her chest. Kagome reached out and wound it between her fingers. Unbidden, but so sharply that it was almost real, she imagined that it belonged to someone else, before shoving that thought from her mind. Bad enough that she was disloyal to one memory - she didn't know if she could live with herself were she to be disloyal, even in her mind, to the memory that still breathed. And yet...

Unsettled, Kagome disengaged her fingers from his hair and drifted off into a troubled sleep.

* * *

Three days later Kagome walked into the living room to find Sesshoumaru with his legs crossed elegantly at the ankle and draped across the couch. Not bothering to ask him to move, she flopped down at the other end of the sofa and extended her legs across his, boldly claiming her own space. Glancing away from the television set, Sesshoumaru's head swiveled, eyes locking on their entwined appendages with an expression of vague horror, no doubt at her audacity. Kagome ignored him, because she had a fabulous idea.

Well, perhaps it wasn't the best of ideas. In fact, it was probably a fairly bad idea, but it would not let go of her. The moment she had awoken on the couch three days ago with a crick in her neck and Sesshoumaru snoring gently into her neck, the idea had latched its sharp, barbed talons into her brain and had hung on, despite all the rational protests she had made. She had made such silly, flighty decisions before and they tended to end in disaster; why, then, did she think that this one would end any differently?

Because, she thought emphatically, I am older, wiser, and this is just for a bit of fun. It's not like I'm holding the fate of millions in my hand. I just want to go out.

That would have been a perfectly good justification, except the parasitic thought had insisted on a certain type of outing.

Sesshoumaru was still staring in faint disbelief at her legs. The rational part of her brain, the part that always warned against too much alcohol or too little sleep, pointed out that she should probably move her limbs. Kagome ignored her brain, because what Sesshoumaru had suggested had been true: she was feeling restless.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

Her skin felt too tight, as though she needed to stretch it out a bit, loosen it up and break it in. For the past three days her toes had curled in her shoes as though resenting their confinement, leaving little blisters on the tender tips, and she hadn't been able to find a place in her flat to alight. Sesshoumaru had sat, still as always, at the table or against the sofa, and watched her putter around like a house-cleaning robot on speed, polishing this or that, rearranging her meager possessions and then putting them back in their original positions. She couldn't tell whether he was laughing at her or not, and that made her more annoyed, more restless and at odds with her skin and bones, out of sync with the rhythm of her blood in her veins.

Restlessness made her reckless, too. Restlessness, she rationalized in the giddiness of her mind, kept her legs where they were. Restlessness was going to prompt her to say something in just a few moments. Restlessness was going to make her ask Sesshoumaru on a date.

Of course, he wouldn't know it was a date, but she would know what it was, though it wasn't out of any ridiculous notion of courting - no, of course not. Rationally, she had decided that the motions of a date would help her pretend to be normal for a bit, would give her the illusion that he was a semi-permanent fixture in her life rather than a creature that obeyed only his own whims. Why he wasn't gone yet was beyond her, but she was feeling more and more desperate to keep him there. He was an odd sort of company, but he was company nonetheless, and she couldn't deny the strange fear that held her in its thrall: one day she would wake up and he would be gone, and their story would be finished. Or unfinished, she couldn't decide which. Either way, her mind was made up.

"We're going to dinner and a movie," she announced, flashing him a grin.

He didn't smile back, merely arched an eyebrow. "Are we now?" he asked, sounding amused.

An unenthusiastic response, but not negative. Signs are encouraging, she thought. Proceed. Out loud, she merely replied, "Yes, we are. And you are going to not complain about the food, or I'll..." She trailed off.

Sesshoumaru arched the other eyebrow.

"... be quite upset," she finished lamely. "In fact, I might even cry." It wasn't the best of trump cards, she admitted, especially against him, but she'd once inadvertently cried herself out of a poor grade in an anatomy lab and that had been enough to remind her that sometimes weakness could be a fairly good bargaining tool. The stress had just been too much, and she'd burst into tears, prompting her professor to shift uncomfortably before telling her she could make the grade up if she came in that Saturday.

Kagome waited patiently for Sesshoumaru to say something along the lines of, "how impressive," or maybe, "go ahead," but he just looked at her with his slightly surprised expression. She forced herself not to fidget. Finally he pursed his lips.

"Hm," was all he said.

As though he had flipped a switch, Kagome suddenly felt lighter, crazier than she had in years. "Oh, good," she exclaimed, clapping her hands in what should have been an embarrassingly childish manner if she could have brought herself to care. "So we're going?"

He inclined his head. "When?" he queried, clearly either resigned or uncaring. Or perhaps that was just his normal mien, regardless of the emotions he felt. She was finding it more and more difficult to attribute any sentiments to him, because there could be so many to which he might be given, and so many more that she wanted him to feel.

Kagome imagined herself capturing little fluttering emotions, like butterflies, and pinning them to him, so that he seemed blanketed with a richly colored coat, even though underneath he stayed as pale and cool as always.

"Miko?" His voice was smooth and grave, hardly a question or prompting - merely a noise to bring her back to the present.

"Huh? Oh!" she said, startled. "Um... I guess tonight, if you feel up to it. I have a bit of money we can spend, and I know a couple of places that aren't too expensive but that aren't bad either, so... tonight?" She could hear the babbling tone in her voice, and wondered when she had become so addlepated and scatterbrained.

"That is acceptable," he said.

And like so many things he did, that brought her up short.

Oh, is it now? she wondered.

It was remarkable, really, how quickly he managed to kill her good mood, and without seeming to try at all. He hadn't insulted her or belittled her in any way, but something in the way he answered had irked her, even though the words were nothing but polite.

Perhaps that was what it was - he was almost always sparing and well-chosen in his words, never saying anything he didn't mean to say, never loud or brash, never slipping up or putting an elegant foot wrong. She drew her legs away from his, tucking her feet close to her body and leaning her knees against the back of the couch. "You don't have to go with me if you don't want to," she replied sullenly. "I know you're just going to humor me."

It was his turn to look slightly startled, as though he hadn't expected this of her, but he didn't say a word, nothing to let her know if her impression of his thoughts was correct or faulty, nothing to go on. She was captured or trapped, once again uncertain of how to proceed with him. She was running in place.

"Or you know what?" she said suddenly, all joy dissipating beneath his scrutiny and her frustration. "Let's not and say we did. In fact, I think I'm going to go out right now, and you don't have to endure my company any longer."

Why am I saying this? she wondered. What am I doing? What purpose does this serve?

She felt as though her control was slipping, the tension too much. Abruptly she stood and started to march toward the door, fully intending to leave and go for a walk, or see her mother and her family, anything to get away from the oppressive atmosphere, away from his assessing gaze.

Kagome strode by him, steps purposeful and eyes ahead when, without warning, there was a great amount of pressure on her wrist, and as she was pulled up short something sliced the thin skin on the soft underside of her arm.

"Ow!" she cried, and strangely, unexpectedly, she felt her almost-dormant powers flare weakly, reaching down through her core and grabbing her, and then just a flash of warmth and a curl of fear at the site of her pain and she was free again. The pressure on her wrist ceased and she stumbled forward.

I purified him, she thought. I just purified him.

And then, He is a demon. He really isn't like me.

In her mind's eye, Kagome watched as she burned away so many demons, like so many insects, as if they were nothing. In her mind's eye, she seared the flesh of the spider, she immolated his limbs and his organs, consumed his bones with her pure powers. And Sesshoumaru, this creature that looked almost like a man, whom she had invited into her home and her life and her body, was made of the same stuff as those horrifying demons, as Naraku who had nearly devoured the world.

As though moving through a thick glue, she turned her head to find the youkai staring at her with a look of consternation, or surprise, or annoyance - even now, I can't tell which, she thought, weirdly giddy - holding his hand at an odd angle, as if he'd been burned.

She thought of all the people he had crushed, just like she had crushed lesser demons.

Kagome wondered what her life expectancy was.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean - I didn't know..."

Sesshoumaru transferred his gaze to his hand as she burbled an apology, even now feeling weirdly guilty for hurting him. She hadn't meant to, she didn't want to, it was a mistake, and so on.

"Please, I'm sorry, it was an accident - "

"It is already healed," he said, cutting her off.

Uncertain and feeling weak, she took a step forward, and then she was suddenly whirled around to face away from him, suddenly locked in his arms against the cage of his body, and he held her so tight she found it hard to breath.

She didn't struggle as he slid his fingers down her arm to the palm of her hand, and she watched, as if in a trance, as he slowly pressed the claw of his thumb into the yielding flesh there.

When he broke the skin, she hissed in pain and a pure light lanced out, wrapping around his fingers, burning him. He jerked away.

Unreasoning worry gripped her, irrational and crazy, as though he were a man who had just pressed his fingers to a hot stove. "Let me see," she begged, ignoring the bleeding of her own hand, reaching for his.

"It is already healed," he repeated dazedly, as though he couldn't believe that it had happened in the first place. "But it hurt." And then, "Nothing ever hurts."

She couldn't believe him. She'd destroyed so many youkai with her powers, had never meant to do this to him, because there had to be something about him that was different.

But her reaction had been instinctual; she was a miko and he was a youkai and there was no changing that.

Her chest hurt horribly. "We should put something on it," she pleaded, babbling, letting concern and platitudes fill her mouth as her mind reeled and the universe splashed around her. "I have burn cream," she told him, as if that made any difference.

He allowed her to capture his hand and bring it to her face, inspecting the damage. Of course, there wasn't any damage, because he could no longer be wounded. Immortal, invincible, and not bound by laws or science or what she had always been told was reality. He was eternal, and she was just a human thing, simply smoke on the wind; she was in the arms of a god, a spirit, a demon, and it wasn't romantic or beautiful or thrilling.

It was painful.

In thought, in action, in knowledge, in memory, in a thousand tiny ways, she was suddenly in agony knowing what he was, and what she was. The miko and the youkai, and she had welcomed him in, needed him, desired him for whatever reason, even though he wasn't human. She'd thought such a thing didn't matter to her, but suddenly it did. It mattered a lot.

Because inside his skin, inside that face, was a dog. A white dog, with red eyes, and a heart that beat differently from her own. Can youkai feel joy, or pain? she wondered distantly. Can they be wise, and good? Merciful? Was everything I saw from Kouga, or Shippou, or Myouga just a whim, a fancy, self preservation, or did they really care about me, or anyone besides themselves?

She was beginning to shake. Youkai, she thought.

I am human, and he is youkai.

But that wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was that this revelation didn't change a thing. Even now a lance of desire was cutting a swathe through her suffering. Even now, he elicited a reaction from her, just by being near. Even now, she still didn't want him to leave her.

Kagome thought of the hanyou boy, the not-quite-human boy she'd loved and lost, and the friends she'd loved and lost, and the adventures she'd hated and loved and cursed and lost that left her a cripple in the world, more alone than if she were the only person in the universe, and her fingers tightened on the taught cords of muscle in the forearm of the demon that held her to him.

She only remembered the sting of her own flesh when the metallic scent of blood hit her nose, but Sesshoumaru seemed to not smell it, or not care that he did; he made no move to help her, or staunch the trickle that flowed over the pale skin of her forearm.

He was still looking at his undamaged hand.

"Fascinating," he said, calmly.

Kagome did not know what to say to that, so she said nothing.

They didn't go out to dinner and a movie that night.

Instead, Kagome locked herself in the bathroom and drank so much whiskey she almost killed herself.

* * *

There once was a hanyou.

He was giving her a look again, that nothing to see here look that she hated. It made him appear suspicious and unhappy, angry, just like he'd been for the first few months of their acquaintance, even though now she loved him and he cared for her and they were so close to the end. Everyone could taste it, and it was sour. They had one fragment, and it was almost time for the curtain to go down, although no one knew whether or not they were starring in a tragedy or a comedy.

"I like it," she said, out of the blue. "So don't look at me like that."

Inuyasha looked startled. "What? I didn't say anything!" he snapped. He was always extra peevish when he was human, that one night of the month.

"I could hear you thinking it," she told him. "And I think you look just fine as a human."

He made a half-growl in his throat that wasn't anything but a long, angry scratch across his vocal chords. He always sounded slightly silly when he tried to growl in his human form, and Kagome had to stifle the unkind giggle that still tickled her when she heard it. She couldn't help it - it was just so incongruous coming from him when he was human. "That's not what I was thinking," he told her huffily, turning away.

My, we're feisty tonight, she thought. "That doesn't make it untrue," she replied, and then lifted her gaze to the stars.

"Keh!" she heard him say.

High above her, the cosmos twinkled like a field of white flowers tossed in a late summer breeze, as though the sky had leaned down and kissed the earth and stolen away some of her marvels. Kagome wished for a falling star to wish upon, so that she could do her own small part in keeping her friends safe. Even if she wasn't the best fighter, she could still wish them all well. She could do that much at least.

They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes while the sky slowly filled up with stars, until it was brimming over, the band of the galaxy shining like a faceted crystal ribbon.

Kagome was the first to break the silence. "Say, Inuyasha..." she said, just to grab his attention.

"What now?" he said.

"What were you thinking of?"

"Keh!" he snorted again. "None of your business!"

The ghost of a smile flitted across her face. Even now, so many months after they had first met, he was sometimes reluctant to open up. It was just part of his nature, she supposed, but someday she'd crack him.

She continued to stare up at the sky.

"Kagome?"

"Mm?" she said, tone noncommittal despite the sudden pause in her breath at an overture from him. "What is it, Inuyasha?" she asked when he didn't continue, hoping he hadn't reconsidered his impulse to speak.

"Were you really thinking that I look okay?"

She did smile then. "Mm-hm," she answered.

She heard him give a half-sigh, half-snort. "I was thinking..." he said, trailing off.

Kagome waited patiently, willing her heart to slow. There was always that foolish hope, that little schoolgirl hope at the edge of her mind, that he was thinking of how much he loved her. On the other hand, he had looked so grouchy earlier that perhaps that wish was not the best one to be wishing for at that particular moment. You should just wish that he is happy. You should just want him to think content thoughts, she said to herself, her own chastisement, aimed at keeping her expectations low. Even if she wished upon a star, all the love and impossible hope in the world would not erase the past.

She could still hope, though. She always had that.

"I was thinking..." he said again.

Kagome turned to him. "You don't have to tell me," she told him. "It's okay." And then she smiled the most reassuring smile she could muster.

He blinked back at her, confused, and then shadowed again. He always looked full of shades and phantoms when he was thinking of Naraku, and how weak he was when he was a human, how he was unable to protect his friends. Inuyasha was, in many ways, a very uncomplicated boy. He didn't like his weakness to be on display, but then again, who did?

Kagome sighed and turned back to the stars before gasping and grabbing his hand. "Look!" she cried, pointing. "A shooting star!"

"Huh?" he responded, slow on the uptake.

"Make a wish!" she demanded before closing her eyes and wishing, with all her might, that she and her friends would make it safely to the end of the story.

When she opened her eyes she glanced over at the boy, the human boy, at her side. "Did you make one?" she asked him eagerly.

Inuyasha shook his head.

"You're no fun," she pouted, releasing his hand and propping her chin on her hand in a peevish posture.

Inuyasha didn't respond. Instead, he brought his hand to his face, inspecting it, and Kagome suddenly realized what she had asked him, what she had told him to do.

Make a wish, she'd demanded, just like Kikyou had told him to do, just like everyone was expecting him to do. Would he use the Shikon no Tama to make himself into a full demon, or would he use it to become human, a pure wish that would cause it to vanish from the realms of men and youkai?

Suddenly Kagome was impressed with the awesome burden she possessed. She could not allow him to become a full demon, but how could she ask him to become human? How could she stop him, when he had suffered so much for it?

The unfairness of it all suddenly weighed her down, looped through her heart like an iron chain and anchored her to the depths, and Inuyasha never breathed a word to her of the turmoil inside him. He just studied his human hand in the shimmering light of the stars, and said nothing.

And Kagome wished it would all go away.

* * *

She woke up in the early morning hours to find Sesshoumaru laying next to her in bed and staring at her, one hand propping his head up, his silver hair dripping through his clawed

fingers and his golden eyes almost glowing in the darkness. It wasn't the most comforting of sights she'd seen upon waking, and she landed hard in consciousness, as though the dreaming had kicked her out of the car and the painful street outside had jolted her back into reality.

"Holy god," she gasped, jerking away from him. "Do you always stare at people when they're sleeping?"

Despite the fact that the room was in shadow, she could see quite clearly that Sesshoumaru gave her a sardonic look, as though he had found some black amusement in her words. "Only," he replied, "when I wish to ascertain that they are not, in fact, dead."

Kagome blinked. "What?" she asked. She blinked again, trying to figure out why Sesshoumaru would be watching her sleep in order to make sure she hadn't kicked off in the night.

He was giving her what could only be described as a disappointed glare. "You did a foolish thing," he told her. "I was keeping it from becoming a fatal thing."

She was so confused, couldn't think straight. She felt fine, though a little tired and definitely a little warm. She kicked the covers off. "What are you talking about? I'm fine," she told him, and then yawned mightily. Suddenly it was a struggle to keep her eyes open.

He didn't elucidate. "Yes," he said finally after a critical silence, "you are probably well enough now. I will let you sleep."

"You'd better," Kagome mumbled and turned over, away from him. She didn't even feel him shift as he settled in, as she was asleep again the second her eyes closed.

The next thing she knew the door closed in her ear and she was cheek to porcelain on the toilet, staring straight at the contents of her stomach, which as far as she could tell had been whiskey, whiskey, and a side order of whiskey.

She didn't blame Sesshoumaru for closing the door. It reeked in the bathroom, an acrid, sour stench that made her stomach heave again. Coughing, eyes streaming, Kagome opened her mouth and let a thin stream of bile trickle down the pristine white porcelain. This went on for a while.

After about thirty minutes she thought she felt well enough to flush and sit up. Her belly lurched a little, but seemed to have settled down just enough for her to lean against the wall. Wiping dried vomit from her crusted nostrils, Kagome tried to assess the situation through the strange cobwebs that obscured her memory.

It felt like someone had rammed a wire brush down her throat and scrubbed it raw, and the muscles in her abdomen were so sore she wondered if she hadn't done a sit-up regimen in the past 12 hours. It wouldn't surprise her, as she could not, in fact, remember anything that had happened since... yesterday?

A little rope of fear coiled around her throat. There was a hole in her memory; she'd wiped it clean with alcohol, and she couldn't remember anything beyond standing in the living room with blood trickling down her wrist.

Moving slowly, Kagome brought her hand to her face in order to inspect the tiny wounds that Sesshoumaru had made, only to find that someone - probably herself - had cleaned and bandaged them. She just hoped she'd done it before she'd started drinking. Who knew what she could have forgotten to do while under the influence. Which brought something else to mind.

Why did I do that? The questioned hovered in front of her eyes, at the forefront of everything. Shame and regret crowded in. Why did I do that?

Youkai, her mind answered, and she remembered that she was alone, and no amount of wishing or pretending would change that.

With a tired effort, Kagome pulled herself to her feet and stared at her reflection in the mirror. She looked terrible; her eyes were crusted, there was snot on her face, bile hanging at the corner of her lips, oil all over her skin and straw in the place of her once passable hair. She looked thinner, too, unhealthy like a cancer patient. She was a jumble of pieces that didn't quite fit, too much and too little for the body she was in.

"I'm falling apart," Kagome whispered, and her reflection echoed the words back to her. No one in his right mind would mistake her for Kikyou now; the priestess had been beautiful, and she looked like something the cat dragged in.

Cat, her mind whispered.

"Oh, shit, I hope I didn't forget to feed Kirara," she said to herself, guilt compounding and weighing, if possible, more heavily than before. "Shit, shit, shit."

Balancing was hard, and she made it as far as the door of her bedroom before she paused to catch her breath and wait for the world - and her stomach - to slosh back into some semblance of steadiness. Shit, shit, shit, she chanted miserably to herself. She wondered if Sesshoumaru was in the habit of mercy killings.

She placed a hand on the door and let it swing open, into the living room. Kagome kept her eyes averted from the room. "Um, excuse me," she said. Her mouth was dry and her tongue was swollen and sticky in her mouth. Dehydrated, her mind supplied. She heard a shifting in the spaces in front of her and knew that Sesshoumaru was turning his attention toward the door, but she couldn't bring herself to look at him. She just wanted her skin to melt and her bones to turn to ashes, and to seep down into the carpet, never to be seen again. "Did I feed Kirara last night?" she asked, mouth running on automatic.

"Yes," he answered.

She nodded. The silence descended again, and outside she heard a police siren wail. Licking her lips, she swallowed hard and tried to fill up the gap that refused to be closed. "Good. I'm, um... going to take a shower."

There was a pause. "Good," he replied.

Burning with humiliation, Kagome retreated into the bathroom and shut the door. Bending, she turned on the water in the sink and swirled water over her face, feeling a sense of d�j� vu before turning to the tub and drawing a bath of lukewarm water.

Gingerly she lowered herself into the water, but her nausea seemed to have dissipated for the time being, and she was able to clean herself without much trouble. It felt good to scrub off the sticky sweat and rank oil that clung to her skin, and she fancied that her body had hated the toxins she had put into it so much that it had expelled them in any way possible. Together, the water on her body and the fragrance of the soap in her nose combined to make her feel refreshed enough to rise from the tub with dripping hair and wrap herself in one of her threadbare towels. With care, she squeezed the excess dampness from the thick tresses that hung down her back before she slowly and gently ran a comb through them.

What I need now, she thought, is some time. Time to rest, and sleep, and just shut up for a while.

Had she always been this sick? Had she always been so tired and sad? Why didn't someone say something? Why didn't they take her to the hospital, or try to save her? Did she hide it too well, or did they just assume she was normal?

She dried her hair and dressed herself in a shirt and dark skirt. Then she stripped the bed, gathered her laundry and all of Sesshoumaru's clothes and went down to her car, not even bothering to speak to the silent youkai who sat in her kitchen, staring out the window at the brick wall, uninterested in her or in anything she did.

It was probably just as well. At least Sesshoumaru didn't pretend to care. At least he wasn't a liar, like everyone else.

* * *

A warm, gentle hand on her shoulder, and the scent of lavender woke her from her nap on the kitchen table at the shrine. "Mama?" she mumbled, cracking open one eye. The soft face of her mother looked down at her with an ignorant compassion that made Kagome's brain hurt to look at it.

"Kagome," her mother said, "why didn't you call? I would have come home early from my shopping trip to see you."

See me? her mind asked. It was such a bitter thing, and Kagome refused to dwell on it.

She had been dreaming, but she'd forgotten upon waking. Pushing herself into a sitting position, Kagome passed a hand over her forehead and across her eyes, trying to wipe away

the confused visions that faded with each passing moment: silver hair, the white flash of a throat, blue eyes and brown eyes and grey skies and a man that she could only remember in silhouettes and silly songs.

Her mother was still speaking. "...Souta's not here, and your grandfather went straight to his room. If you want to go say hello to him before he falls asleep, I suggest you hurry." She was bustling about the kitchen, putting away packages of noodles and putting milk in the refrigerator. "He falls asleep the second his head hits a pillow these days, the poor man."

Poor man, her head repeated softly.

"...and I know I said you don't have to call to come over and do the laundry, but I wish you would. We hardly ever see you these days."

These days. "Sorry," she mumbled. Her stomach was upset again, though she couldn't tell if it was because she was hungry or nauseous. Maybe a bit of cold rice would do her good.

Groggily, Kagome reasserted herself, tried to ascertain where she was and when she was. Her last load of laundry was in the dryer - she could hear the clunking of clothes and sheets tumbling over each other in the machine - and she felt an exhausted gratitude that she would be able to leave soon, and a flash of tired frustration that she couldn't just tell her mother that she wanted to be alone. That would be rude, and the only thing she knew about herself at that moment was that she was a polite girl, who always minded her manners and her elders. Long ago, her mother had told her that she was a girl who did the right thing, but that girl had disappeared with dreams deferred and loves lost, and she didn't know how to go back.

She didn't know if she would go back to being that girl, even if she could.

Her mother was still puttering. Weirdly, she noted that her mother had gained weight and was aging into a matronly woman who would make a good grandmother, even though it was highly unlikely that either she or Souta would have children any time soon. But in the meantime, she would continue on being her mother. Kagome's head ached to think of all the times her mother had gone through those exact same motions, over and over again, like a robot on a broken record. Pick up sauce, put in cupboard, bandage skinned knee, pat daughter on head, placate father, do laundry, do cleaning go, to store, pick up rice, put in cupboard - lather, rinse, repeat. Record, play, rewind, record, play, rewind, for years and years and years.

"Mama?" she said suddenly, startling herself with the words. Something had removed the filter from her brain to her mouth, and Kagome listened to the things that tumbled out as her mother turned away from the sink, an expression of surprise on her face.

"Mama," Kagome repeated, "what do you remember most about Papa?"

Surprise! she thought. Didn't know you were going to say that, did you?

No, she replied to herself, in the weary calm of her mind. No, I didn't.

Across from her, her mother pulled out a chair and sat down, folding her hands in front of her on the table. "Well," she said quietly, "I'm not quite sure."

Kagome waited patiently, because it was too much effort to open her mouth and ask again, while her mother put one clear lacquered fingernail against her powdered chin, and thought to herself.

"I suppose," she said, after a while, "I remember his voice the most."

"His voice?" Her mouth formed the words without her go-ahead.

Her mother, ignorant of Kagome's newfound lack of control, smiled and nodded. "He had a wonderful voice, and he loved to sing. Did you know he used to be in the choir at his high school, just like you? And he starred in plays and sang so sweetly that I always felt just a little superior, knowing how lovely his voice was and how attractive it made him to everyone else. But he chose me, and I chose him, so I had that voice all to myself, and then I shared it with you two." Her mother refolded her hands and twiddled her thumbs. Kagome watched as she focused on her restless fingers, but knew that her eyes gazed far away. Perhaps her mother was remembering how her father's hands had felt on her own, or how his voice had sung to her so gently when they were together.

These are things the world never needs to know.

"Do you have a recording of it?" Kagome said, suddenly.

Her mother shook her head, and a glossy lock of black hair, now streaked with a little gray, fell into her eye. "No. But that's all right. I loved his voice so much that it was almost separate from him; I remember it the most because of all the things about him, I loved it the most."

The most. The thought drifted across her mind. What did I love the most? Why can't I remember? At the edge of her hearing, the buzzer on the dryer snarled, signaling the end of a cycle.

"By the way, Kagome," her mother said, leaning in, the lavender scent now florid and sickly-sweet, heavy and nauseating, caught in her throat and nose. "Whatever happened to that young man you were interested in? Did he ask you out? Did you go on a date with him?" She was leaning heavily on her elbows, her forearms pushing her breasts together in fleshy mounds, and the little conspiratorial smile she had plastered on her face looked obscene, as though she were leering, in anticipation of something carnal.

It took a long moment for Kagome to remember that she had told her mother she was having boy problems. Boy problems! As if that was all they were! She had more problems than that. So many more problems. Why do you want me to find someone new, Mama? she wanted to say. Why do you think that would do me any good? Didn't you see how desperate and needy I was with Yoshi? Didn't you see how sad it made me to move on? Why couldn't you have remembered with me, instead of telling me to forget?

A memory passed across her mind then, ephemeral and pale, of herself at seventeen years old, staring at the scarred wood of Goshinboku while her mother chastised her for being so self-centered, so obsessed with the things she couldn't change. And her mother had been so gentle in her admonishments, had scolded her daughter with such tender care that it hurt just that much more. Kagome could feel the breeze and the smell of springtime wafting across her face. I met Inuyasha in springtime, she almost told her mother, but that was something that had to be locked away, only drawn out in private now. She couldn't be a slave to the past, her mother said, but how could it be any other way?

Remember only the beginning, not the end, Sesshoumaru had told her.

But where do memories end? she wanted to know. Where do they stop?

"Kagome?" her mother said, and she was reminded of where she was.

Kagome looked away as she rose from the table to gather her laundry and flee the shrine. "What happened with him?" she repeated, so drained that it was a chore to even breathe. Out of the corner of her mind, her mother's concerned face suddenly frowned, twisted in worry, but it was too late, too late.

"Nothing happened with him," she told her mother. "Nothing at all."

* * *

Her laundry was still in her car, getting wrinkled, but Kagome didn't really care. She'd driven back to her flat and parked, but she'd left the car there, instead grabbing her purse from the passenger seat and climbing out to go to the grocery store. The walk was a short one, not at all arduous, and she was now walking among the aisles, basket in hand filling up with so many packages of instant soup she might as well have been fifteen again and preparing to leave for more rustic times.

She stocked up on condensed juice as well, and vitamins to supplement her diet. She bought a few bottles of water to be filled and refilled, and on a whim she grabbed a tube of strawberry lip gloss. It had been so long since she'd painted her face and tried to make herself pretty that the smell of the cosmetics turned her stomach a little all over again, although that might have been an aftereffect of the whiskey.

Kagome paid for her purchases and walked out of the store, and into the Tokyo afternoon. It was a nice day, but for some reason she was finding it difficult to appreciate the warmth of the sun or the smell of summer. It was as though she were tied to the world with the thinnest of tethers, as if she were bound to the earth through only the slightest of chains.

This is me, Kagome thought as she waited for the light to change so she could cross the street. This is me being normal. This is me at an intersection, waiting for a light to turn green so I can walk.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

She'd never had to wait for a stupid light to change when she had been younger. When I was young... but I'm to young to think, 'when I was young,' aren't I? Maybe I should amend that to, 'when I was happy.' This is me, thinking of when I was happy.

It had been almost a month since she'd last put foot to unpaved ground, on a mountainside. School was going to start again, soon.

This is me, in modern Japan, thinking of the countryside.

All this had been so empty when she was younger and happier, and it had been so clear and fresh and new then as well. Now, someone jostled her elbow. Kagome heard them mutter an apology, but it seemed too much effort to acknowledge it, so she pretended not to notice. A car passed in front of her, and she noticed the occupant inside, a reasonably good-looking young man, checking her out.

You don't know me, she fancied sending him a message, telepathically. You don't want me. This is me, an island in the ocean. This is me, alone in a crowd.

Kagome stared at the pavement under her toes and noticed, beneath the sun, that it glittered slightly, as though there were pieces of some kind of crystal trapped in the concrete. She let her eyes unfocus, noticing how the world blurred around her. Someone jostled her again, and she thought, This is me, invisible.

"Miss? Miss?" A hand touched her elbow, and Kagome moved away and looked up. A teenage boy was looking at her with concern. "Miss, are you all right?" he asked, taking a step forward.

"What? Oh, yes," she answered blinking as her vision cleared and noticing that she was all alone on the corner.

"Only, the light changed, and you didn't move," the boy said, then cocked his head and frowned. "Are you sure you're okay? Are you crying?"

Startled, Kagome's hand flew to her face, and her fingers brushed against a wetness on her cheek.

"I have been crying," she said in wonderment, as though she hadn't shed a tear in her life. "I have been crying." The boy took another step toward her, and she panicked. Don't touch me, she thought. Escape. And she turned away, not even thanking him, and hurried across the street as the light turned red.

This is me, going home, she thought, and she went home. Sesshoumaru sat on the sofa again, where he always did, reading a book, and she puttered around, just like her mother, putting away the excess of groceries, placing bottles in the refrigerator, stowing things in cupboards. I won't have to leave this flat for a long time, she thought.

She went down to the car and got her laundry, hauled it up the stairs. Once inside, she locked the door behind her before dragging the clothes into the closet and folding them up, draping

them over hangers. She put the sheets on the bed as well, but declined to pull the comforter up and cover the clean linens. There wasn't anyone she needed to impress anyway.

When she was done, Kagome went into the living room and found her cell phone. The battery was only half-charged, and she turned it off completely. As almost an afterthought, she hid it in the teakettle. Then she walked over and stood in front of Sesshoumaru.

He didn't acknowledge her immediately. Kagome didn't really care - it wasn't as if she was going anywhere - and took the opportunity to study him. She imagined him with his hair pulled back elegantly, with gold-rimmed reading glasses perched on his nose. In her mind, he looked good; he looked good no matter what.

Sesshoumaru seemed to finish the paragraph he had been reading, and let the book fall gracefully into his lap, the pages closing on one long, elegant finger.

"Yes?" he asked.

If Inuyasha were still alive, she said to herself, the answer to this question would be 'no.'

"Do you think I am weak now?" she asked him. It wasn't an urgent question, more out of idle curiosity than anything, and his answer wouldn't have any impact on how she felt. Yes, no, maybe, you've always thought I was weak, none of that matters. Just answer me.

He gazed up at her, and she thought she saw something glitter in his eyes. "Why do you ask?" he finally said.

Kagome laughed. She couldn't help herself.

She was so past caring, it didn't matter anyway. Without hesitation, she reached out and ran a finger along his cheek, tracing one of the stripes that graced his skin. "I really love your markings," she told him. I really love your markings, and your hair. I love your eyes, and your voice. And that is all I will allow myself to love about you.

But I do love them.

Sesshoumaru looked at her for the endless moment it took for her to run down the length of one stripe.

Then he smiled, and it was small, but real and utterly breathtaking. Turning his head toward her hand, he caught her finger between his teeth, and swirled his tongue over it, sucking gently, pulling at her skin, tugging at her. Kagome felt the sensation all the way down to her toes.

Throwing caution to the wind, she knelt in front of him, and he followed with his eyes, still sucking on her fingertip, the book on his lap forgotten.

Gently, she tugged her hand away from him and began to unbutton his shirt, revealing the flesh beneath. She was so hungry, so empty, and he looked so good that she placed her hands on his knees and parted his thighs, relishing the warm sigh that slipped from between his teeth as

her fingers traced upwards, toward his waist. Leaning in, she pressed her lips to his chest, to the shining white marble skin there. She let her tongue escape and taste him.

He tasted like rainwater. He smelled like lightning.

Beneath her spread hands, his hips flexed upwards, stroking against her stomach.

"Ssh," she whispered. She thought he gave a small laugh, but it was quickly strangled by the groan in his throat when she brushed her knuckles against his erection before moving to his waist and unbuttoning his trousers.

His hands were on her upper arms, clenching convulsively in time with the slight movements of his pelvis.

He was needy beneath her, his glassy eyes drifting closed, head lolling on his suddenly limp neck, little sounds of desire escaping his throat.

Kagome felt powerful. I love the way you look when I do this, she thought. Slowly she parted the teeth of his zipper, one by one, as she leaned in and slid the tip of her tongue over one cheekbone, chasing the tiger-stripe into his hair, fingers chasing the seam of his trousers down between his legs.

When she took him into her mouth, she felt him jump against her tongue, felt him tangle his hands in her hair, and she wrapped a hand around the base of his shaft and moved in time with his helpless thrusts. When she whimpered, he jerked and came, hot and salty and sickly sweet, and she lapped it all up. I love that I can do this to you. I don't know why I can, but I love it anyway. This is what I will remember.

He was collapsed backwards, clothing askew and eyes closed, and Kagome kissed a trail up his body to his ear. She took his hands in her own and pulled him off the couch. Sesshoumaru followed her into the bedroom, and Kagome locked the door behind them.

* * *

There once was a resurrected girl.

Rin was bright and golden and her soul shone through her eyes like the sun shining down through the boughs of orange and red leaves in the forest where they hid from the horde of base youkai Naraku had spat forth.

Kagome was breathing hard, her heart pounding a staccato rhythm behind her sternum, and her fingers were numb and cold despite the warmth of the autumn day. Not even the sun could warm her now, because today was the end, and she was so nervous she thought she would faint. She probably would faint if she didn't stop gulping in huge drafts of air. Through sheer willpower, she slowed her breathing and smiled at the little girl next to her. She had to be strong for Rin-chan at least, if not for herself. The bow she carried felt awkward against her back, so she unslung it and pulled an arrow from her quiver as she tried to give the little girl a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry," she said. "We'll be safe here."

Rin just looked up at her and smiled hugely. "Mm-hm," she answered. "Sesshoumaru-sama won't let those monsters come after us!"

There was that weird faith again. From the first dumbfounding moment when the little girl had cried out the name of Inuyasha's brother and followed him into the forest, all glimpses of her had been incidental and fleeting, but she'd always been at Sesshoumaru's side, or in the presence of Jaken, or on the dragon that Sesshoumaru sometimes rode. For his part, Sesshoumaru never seemed to acknowledge her at all, but she acted as though he hung the stars in the sky, or made the sun rise every day.

Kagome couldn't understand it. Had the child just started following him one day, and he had allowed it? Had he thought she would make a good pet? Why was she with him? Perhaps, she thought, slightly uncharitably, she's a little daft. I wonder if you can smell crazy when you're an inuyoukai. Maybe he took pity on her crazy little brain. Kagome shook her head at the thought. Rin didn't seem crazy, and besides, pity and Sesshoumaru simply did not dwell on the same plane of existence. She'd never seen an ounce of mercy from him that he didn't pass off as something else - duty, or expediency, or anything but compassion.

Behind them, something rustled. Kagome decided to move on. She grabbed Rin's hand and they forged on ahead, Rin jumping nimbly alongside her despite her long yukata, and branches whipping against Kagome's bare legs, slowing her down. God, I would kill for a pair of jeans right now, Kagome thought.

"Don't worry!" Rin panted next to her as they cleared a particularly upstanding root, "Sesshoumaru-sama will save us!"

"I don't think... we should count on that!" Kagome huffed. She had no idea where they were, but as long as it was away, she was happy.

"Take the girl," Inuyasha screamed, "and get out of here!" Thick miasma oozed across the ground, toward them. Inuyasha was already coughing, Sesshoumaru and Jaken had leapt away, and Miroku and Sango stood inside a barrier - Kagome didn't need to be told twice. She grabbed Rin and fled.

Please, let them be safe, Kagome prayed. Gradually she let herself come to a stop, and strained to hear any movement around them over the sound of their breathing. After a minute, no noise had met her ear. She collapsed, arms bracing her against the ground.

"Kagome-sama!" Rin cried. "Are you all right?"

Kagome nodded as well as she could between panting breaths. "I'm okay," she gasped. "I'm just so tired."

"It's okay!" the little girl said. "We'll be all right. I promise."

Her faith was so touching. Kagome had to know.

"Rin," she said a moment later, after she had regained her breath. "Why do you follow Sesshoumaru?"

The little girl blinked, as though confused by the question. Kagome tried to rephrase it. "I mean, how did you meet?"

Rin giggled. "We met in a forest. I took care of him when he was sick," she said, guilelessly.

"And he let you take care of him?"

The little girl shook her head. "He didn't like it, but he couldn't move. He was really sick."

"And then...?"

The bright eyes suddenly became shadowed, and Rin squatted down next to Kagome, grasping her knees. Very gently, she began to rock back and forth. "Then he took care of me," she whispered.

There was something there, something dark and horror-filled that she remembered, but Kagome had to know. She was feeling the edge of the story, a piece of the puzzle snapping into place. "You were sick, too?" Kagome asked gently.

Rin shook her head, still rocking.

"You were alone?"

She nodded. "But that wasn't it," she whispered.

Back and forth, back and forth, and it seemed to Kagome that someone had turned off a light, and she knew.

She died, and he brought her back to life, she thought.

Back and forth, back and forth the little girl rocked, and it was a pitiful thing to see.

"But now you live with him, after he took care of you?" she said, desperate to stop the rocking, desperate to wipe away the look of quiet terror on the little face.

"Yes," she answered. "Yes, yes, yes, yes - "

Gently, Kagome laid her hands on Rin's thin shoulders. "It's okay now," she crooned. "It's okay, I promise."

There was a rustling in the trees, and Kagome felt a curl of panic again. "Rin-chan," she said firmly, "we have to move on."

The little girl squeezed her eyes shut.

"Rin-chan? Rin-chan! We have to go!"

Then Rin opened her eyes and Kagome peered into them, and it was like looking through a hole in the universe - dark, and empty, and deep.

"I wish Sesshoumaru-sama were here," the little girl whispered, and then something was rustling right over Kagome's shoulder and she didn't even hesitate. She scooped up the child and ran, and over and over Rin whimpered in her ear, like a mantra, like a cry to heaven, "Sesshoumaru-sama, Sesshoumaru-sama, Sesshoumaru-sama, I wish Sesshoumaru-sama were here - "

Me, too, Kagome thought, listening to the sounds of pursuit closing in behind them. Me, too.

She ran on into the forest.

* * *

The next morning Kagome gazed, sleepily, half-satiated and half-aroused, at Sesshoumaru's elegant, delicate fingers. She was sleepy and satiated because she hadn't slept a wink, too busy with the business of tangled limbs and twisted sheets to dip into slumber, and she was aroused because that elegant hand - with its elegant claws, rotating on its elegant, striped wrist - that hand she was watching was stroking her breast in small, skimming circles.

Those circles were making her mouth water, slowly driving her crazy, but she was so relaxed she couldn't bring herself to make a move. Long, bright yellow squares of beautiful morning sunshine splashed across the bed, making the whole room glow with the dawn. Kagome especially liked the halo of reflected light from Sesshoumaru's hand moving across her skin. It was a nice side effect of his extremely pleasurable diversion.

Sesshoumaru was also watching, with sleepy eyes, his own fingers, as though he had no control over them as they traced those slow, sexy circles. Kagome noted with a strangely clinical observation that while Sesshoumaru's true form might be that of a giant white dog, he still held that same bizarre fascination with the female breast that all men seemed to possess. She, herself, could not see what was so great about them - they bounced, they flopped, they got in the way when one wished to sleep on one's stomach - but if he kept doing that, then oh, she might be convinced they were the greatest thing since... ever.

The hand he was using was his left. It was the one that Inuyasha had so cruelly chopped off with Tessaiga. Granted, Sesshoumaru was trying to kill them at that point, but Kagome felt, now, with those warm, enchanting fingers dancing across her skin, that it was terribly cruel of Inuyasha to do such a thing. Chopping off this hand had been a crime.

I love this hand, Kagome thought.

A fingertip caught her nipple, sending a jolt of languid electricity straight down to the apex of her thighs.

I really love this hand, she thought.

Sesshoumaru licked his lips, and she would have leaned in and kissed them, but something still held her back. He hadn't kissed her on the lips since that first time in the kitchen, and she somehow felt like it would be a violation of his personal space to do so. She settled, instead, for squirming a little, bringing her legs together in a bit of delightful friction.

That hand traveled down to her hip and began to trace lazy circles there as well. Kagome gave a happy sigh.

Sesshoumaru just looked at her with his sleepy, sex-drugged golden eyes, and quirked a corner of his mouth.

She quirked her own in return before turning back to that arm that she had decided she loved so much.

She watched as, beneath his shining skin, his muscles bunched and moved and slid over each other, rhythmically and steadily. From the swell of his biceps to the falling slope of the supinator - hmm, she thought distantly, all that studying did pay off - each muscle was perfectly formed, and worked so beautifully that she found herself falling into almost a trance. She couldn't believe that this arm had once been nothing but a stump.

"How long did it take for that arm to grow back?" she asked abruptly. A superficial flexor jumped at the words, but he didn't stop his slow, languid ministrations. He didn't answer for a long while, and she thought he wasn't going to answer at all, until he opened his mouth.

"I am uncertain," he said. "I was sealed away before it had grown back completely."

Kagome just nodded, her hair sliding across the pillow. It had only been idle curiosity at any rate, and was supremely unimportant in the grand scheme of things. Next to her, Sesshoumaru rolled fractionally nearer, moving his hand up to the curve of her waist, and then down to the small of her back. Then he surprised her by speaking again.

"I think, perhaps," he said slowly, "that it was a good thing I sealed myself away before it was finished regenerating."

Kagome's eyelids drifted shut, and she waited while he drew shivery spirals on her skin. When no other explanation seemed forthcoming, she opened her eyes and tried to pin him with a look, but the effect was spoiled by the insistence of her eyeballs in rolling back in mouth-watering pleasure. That hand really is quite nice, she thought. It took her a moment to get back on track.

"Why is that?" she finally asked as he let his hand wander back upwards again to her breast.

Mmm.

Sesshoumaru looked her in the eye. "Oh," he said, as though it had been inconsequential. "It itched."

Kagome gave an unladylike snort, covering her mouth too late to stifle it. "Itched?" she asked.

"Indeed," he replied, and if she hadn't known better, she would have sworn that he sounded almost rueful.

"I'm sorry," she said, "it's rude of me to laugh, but... it just seems funny."

Sesshoumaru didn't seem to deem that worthy of a response. Gently, he flattened his palm against the soft mound of her bosom, causing a warmth to spread tendrils through her chest and down her belly, drawing out a little noise from somewhere high in her throat. One gentle, smooth claw made the journey from the valley of her breasts to the hollow of her throat, where it stayed, lightly tickling her.

"Ooh," she murmured, and then, to wrap up the conversation so they could move on to more important things, "Well, I'm glad you have it ba-ack..."

On the last word her voice suddenly shot up in pitch, for Sesshoumaru had leaned in and nipped her, very lightly, on the neck.

Her hands were on his arm now, smoothing over the muscles that were so perfectly formed.

"Mm," he replied before moving down and hungrily sucking her nipple into his hot mouth. Kagome could feel the delightful points of his fangs resting against the curve of her flesh, and then he flicked his tongue, driving the tip of her breast gently into his teeth, and Kagome forgot all about talking.

* * *

Kagome loved the small of his back. Where the curve of his muscles - well-formed from swordplay and carrying seventy-five pounds of armor - met the swell of his buttocks was a little hollow, and the moment he acquiesced to a back rub and rolled onto his stomach, Kagome decided that it was the most beautiful part of him. She decided that she could spend hours tracing her fingers over that beautiful shallow spot. She decided that she could live there, forever, in that beautiful valley, and as long as she never had to move she could be blissfully happy. She planted a kiss on that beautiful, perfect curve of his spine.

"I," Sesshoumaru said, from the cradle of his crossed wrists where he had rested his brow, "was led to believe I was to be receiving a massage."

Kagome felt vaguely disappointed. "Sorry," she said, suddenly contrite and guilty again, suddenly drawn out of that beautiful valley, into a person and a place where she didn't want to be. "I didn't know you didn't like that." She moved toward him, made a move to lift her leg and straddle his hips from behind when Sesshoumaru lifted himself away from her, ever so slightly. She stopped and looked at his face.

He was giving her that sleepy, needy look again, the one that seemed to hot-wire her brain and take her from complacent to delirious with the speed and subtlety of a jolt of electricity. "It is not unpleasant," he said, and Kagome could see, in the shadowy cave beneath his hips, that he was semi-erect again, and understood.

"I see," she replied, suppressing the impulse, with some difficulty, to push him onto his back and roll him around in her mouth until he was urgent and ready again. She licked her lips. "I'll just get on with it, shall I?"

"Do," he said, and rolled back.

Kagome moved into position, though a small, residual modesty kept her unclothed body from touching him too much. Her thighs grazed the outside of his hips, but that was all. Gingerly, she leaned down and placed her palms flat on his back, and with care she pressed down and up, traveling over the terrain of his body.

He was cool beneath her hands. It was so difficult to tell how he would feel beneath her fingers from one minute to the next - he could go from untouchably chilly to furnace-hot in a matter of seconds - that she was startled to find him cool when he had responded to her so favorably only moments before. Kagome bit her lip and let her fingers slide up beneath the lovely waterfall of his hair where it parted and flowed over his arms at his shoulders.

His head was turned to the side, pillowed on his forearms, and his eyes were closed. Kagome wanted to place a fingertip on the edges of his long lashes and relish their softness, to follow the curve of that fringe where it lay.

I'm going crazy, she thought, jerking her eyes away from his face and concentrating on the semi-circles her thumbs were etching into his back. He's like a drug. I'll have to go to rehabilitation. Everyone will laugh at me.

For ten minutes, Kagome tried to think only of the directions muscles went, remembering the grain and placement from too many anatomy labs, and she pulled them apart, forced them to relax beneath her touch. He didn't seem very tense - of course, she thought wryly, recent activities are not known for raising one's stress level - but she enjoyed the feel of all his strength and power rolling beneath her fingertips. She liked to think about the barely leashed intensity that he possessed, and studiously avoided thinking about how she wished that energy would be put to use. Shifting on her knees, Kagome bit her lip and tried to think about something else.

When her fingers were tired, she sighed and leaned back, finally allowing herself to rest fully on him. He appeared to be asleep, so it didn't matter that she was flush against him; he couldn't feel the wetness of her if he was unconscious, could he?

And she was wet. Thinking about something else didn't work very well when he smelled amazing, and he looked even better than he smelled, and he felt better than he looked, and all in all it was suddenly very unfair that he appeared to be dreaming.

Well, she reasoned, if he's asleep, he won't mind if I do this. Kagome leaned forward and placed a kiss between his shoulder blades before sitting up again. She glanced once more at his sleeping face.

Or not.

Sesshoumaru was looking at her from the corner of one eye.

"Did I wake you up?" she asked.

"No," he replied, though his voice was somewhat muffled by the curve of his shoulder.

"Oh," she said. "Um."

"Do that again."

So Kagome did it again, and then again, following the gentle trench of his spine up and into his hair, and then he was turning over, pressing into the dark space between her legs, and they were both hot and greedy again. One hand fisted in her hair and pulled her head back, and she gasped for air as he flattened his palm against her stomach, roughly catching the tender skin there in its quest toward the swell of her breast. He wasn't gentle this time; now he was insatiable, his hands hungry and demanding and she was trapped by him, a willing captive. She couldn't see what he was doing - all she could see was the fading afternoon light on the ceiling - but she could feel him, all over, in her toes and her quivering thighs, in her shallow breaths and her aching bones, in her thrumming veins and the lightning that ricocheted inside the cage of her skin.

She was falling, and her fingers scrabbled to find purchase on his thighs, against his forearm and then he was pulling her down, ravenous mouth open to catch her fluttering pulse between his teeth.

She whimpered, hips bucking against his, and he growled, harsh and angry and feral. Her fingers fumbled around him, pushing him into her, and they tumbled over and around and against each other in the fading light of day.

* * *

Kagome woke up to hear Sesshoumaru sloshing around in the bathtub, and her sleep-addled mind was visited with the most incongruous vision of a younger version of him, about seven years old or so, splashing around in a tin basin and chasing a little rubber ducky. Seemingly in deference to her impression of Sesshoumaru, the rubber ducky looked suitably demonic. After all, it simply wouldn't do to have a mortal rubber ducky to play with, would it?

The little dream-vision was so startlingly bizarre and inexplicable that her eyes flew open and she sat straight up in bed as though waking from a nightmare.

I am never going to sleep on an empty stomach again, she thought. Never, ever.

One major decision out of the way - Kagome already felt productive - she stretched and yawned before leaning back on her hands and looking over at the empty space where Sesshoumaru had spent the night. The sheets looked comfortably rumpled and well-used, but one thing stuck out at her, and it was so strange that it broke through the fog of her tired brain. Frowning, Kagome cocked her head to the side and looked closer at the anomaly.

In the middle of his side of the bed was one of her dog-eared romance novels, a place somewhere in the latter half of the book meticulously marked with a pencil he'd probably found perched atop the dresser.

Kagome blinked and decided she couldn't handle the thought of Sesshoumaru reading Blue Moon Passions. He had probably been bored when he woke up, and grabbed the book from the little pile next to the bed, but it was unsettling just the same. Kagome sighed, clambered out of bed, unlocked the door, and padded into the kitchen in search of a dose of coffee to wake her up.

Coffee, lots of cream, lots of sugar, she thought to herself. That's what I need. And no demonic rubber duckies.

Smoothly, Kagome went through the motions required to bring her a daily dose of legal stimulant. She took a deep breath as the coffee finished percolating before grabbing a mug and pouring herself a cup, then adding enough cream and sugar to the concoction that she was fairly certain her spoon would be able to stand up in the middle of the mug without any support. She didn't try it, though. Instead she padded back to her room and settled in on her side of the bed, slowly sipping the brew as she waited for Sesshoumaru to get out of the bathroom.

Ten minutes later the door swung open and Sesshoumaru looked into the room to find Kagome reading the novel he had left behind with a little smirk on her face.

"I didn't know you liked such diversions," she said to him, casting a coy little glance in his direction. Impressively, Sesshoumaru kept his dignity as he smirked back and raised an arm to prop himself on the doorframe.

"All diversions are worth the time," he said to her evenly, "when one possesses the time to do them."

"Even diversions such as these?" she asked him. "This isn't really your style."

Sesshoumaru tilted his head in that elegant version of a shrug he liked to employ, as though to say, Perhaps not, perhaps so.

Kagome huffed in amused annoyance. "Well," she said, "what made you think Blue Moon Passions would be a good diversion, rather than, say - " she glanced down at the pile at the side of the bed " - Heavenly Nights or A Samurai's Wife?" She would have thought the samurai book might have caught his attention, if only for the sheer amusement he would have found in the historical inaccuracies. Passions was about a hime and her suitor - not the manliest of subjects, to say the least.

He gave her a look. He really appeared magnificent in the early morning light, backlit by the yellow glow from the bathroom, pale skin shining and fresh from his bath. He had one clawed hand hooked into the towel he wore at his waist, and he wore nothing else. Damp hair hung heavily down his back, and his lip quirked just enough that she could see the pointed gleam of one fang peeking from the darkness of his mouth.

"I knew someone once who would have enjoyed that story. She read many like it," he told her.

"Oh," Kagome said, suddenly feeling awkward. Rin, she thought. Rin was forever frozen in her mind as a little girl, but Kagome knew that she must have grown up at some point, must have liked romance stories and tales of love like any young woman. Did she dream of a knight in shining armor? Kagome thought, Did she dream of that like everyone does?

But of course, Rin wouldn't have to dream. She'd already been saved by a lord in shining armor, who protected her and let her live when she otherwise would have died.

With care, Kagome set the book aside. "It was Rin, wasn't it?" she asked. "Who liked those stories."

Sesshoumaru was looking at her, and it seemed as if he held a queer sort of compassion in his eyes. "Yes, it was Rin," he murmured gently.

Kagome nodded. Of course it was. Of course. "May I... may I ask you a question?" she said, casting her eyes downwards. She studied his toes, where they left little damp indentations on the carpet.

Sesshoumaru didn't seem inclined to either grant or withhold permission, so Kagome looked up at his face. "Did you love her?" she asked.

The question hung in the air between them, and for a long time neither of them said anything at all, and Kagome's thoughts drifted in her head, wondering what she would do if he said yes, or if he said no.

Finally, he replied.

"I am not certain I know what love is," he said to her, and then grinned his odd, feral grin that held no humor.

Kagome thought of Inuyasha.

"How strange," she said, after a moment. "Me, either."

The room was quiet again, and then Sesshoumaru gave that sharp, humorless snort of amusement. "How strange," he agreed, and then crossed the room and took her into his arms as the morning sun broke through the blinds.

* * *

After two days of couplings, Kagome threw the sheets off the bed and groaned. "Do you realize," she announced peevishly, "that I have to go back to school in a week? I can't believe I almost forgot that classes start soon."

Sesshoumaru gave her a bored glance that clearly said, So?

"So it's probably going to be really boring for you around here," Kagome told him. "I'll be gone all day at class, learning how to stitch people up and stuff drugs in their mouth and you'll be here reading old romance novels."

The demon merely tilted his head.

Kagome sighed. "Aren't you going to be bored?" she asked. "I can only read so many of those things myself before I get tired of them."

"Many things are boring," he told her cryptically.

Shifting uncomfortably, lest he decide to enlighten her as to what, precisely, he found boring and possibly pinning her on the list, Kagome tried switching her approach.

"Have you thought about getting a job?" she asked.

Sesshoumaru blinked. "What would purpose would such a thing serve?" he asked her. "I am not a laborer."

That much, at least, was true. Sesshoumaru was not meant for menial things. However... "Well," she said, "a job gives you money - "

"For what purpose would I require money?" he asked, interrupting her.

Kagome was drawn up short. Food, water, shelter... she thought, and then she realized how ridiculous that sounded. The demon required none of those things. Meeting new people was likewise a stupid reason for acquiring a job, as he didn't like people and required little company.

"Something to do?" she supplied lamely.

He didn't reply.

Kagome cast about for the things he could do, and found that there weren't many. He could teach kenjutsu, but he would be stronger and more powerful than any human being, so that was probably out of the question, and the same things precluded him from becoming a professional fighter. Such things would attract unwanted attention to himself. He had the ability to protect, but not the will, so bodyguard was also a bad career choice, and Japan no longer had any army worth speaking of, so his abilities could not be put to use in that way. He could, she supposed, settle any outstanding wars that were still being waged, but human beings tended to fight each other no matter what, so that meant he would have to kill everyone. That was not the most attractive of options.

What else? she thought. What else? Then she hit on something.

"I've got it!" she cried. "You can be a healer!"

Sesshoumaru didn't reply, but the vague widening of his eyes suggested that he thought she had taken a flying plunge off the deep end while he wasn't looking.

Kagome clapped, unsure herself if she was joking or serious. "You have Tenseiga," she said. "You can go around and save lives."

"That is an idea," he said slowly, though the expression in his eyes added, A bad idea.

"I know," she said. "But it was nice to think of, just for a moment. Think of all the people you could save."

"Think," he said, "of all the people I couldn't."

Kagome didn't want to think of that. "Well," she said, "could you teach me how to use it? It might come in handy some day."

Sesshoumaru snorted. "As if a human could wield such a blade."

"Well it was just a thought," she said huffily. "I won't try to help you out ever again if you're going to be that way."

"What a stroke of luck for me," he replied.

Kagome tackled him, and pushed thoughts of the future from her mind.

* * *

After three days, in which neither she nor he wore any sort of clothing, events began to run together in her mind. She snatched sleep where she could, only to awaken to find herself getting laid, or with a hungry youkai stroking claws down her belly, nibbling on the protruding bone of her hip, sniffing the sensitive crook of her elbow as though he could discover the scent of her blood through persistence alone.

Sometimes, she would suckle on him, as though she were starving, until he would push her away and return the favor, lapping his tongue against the tender flesh that quivered between her thighs, drinking all he could.

She liked the soft skin of the inside of his thigh, the jumping tendon that tensed and relaxed in time with her bobbing head. She loved his sharp claws running through her hair. She loved waking up and finding him cradling her with his body, rocking sleepily against her, neither of them in any hurry to get anywhere, and she drifted from orgasm to orgasm as he nuzzled her throat.

Kagome found it easier and easier to talk to him, in that dreamy time between when she had sealed them in, and when she would have to unseal them again.

One day, she was straddling his hips and he was propped against the headboard. He pulled her head back using the gentle tether of her hair, allowing himself access to her breasts. He loved nipping at them while she made little cries in her throat. And then he bit just a little too hard and she jerked away, shocking him with her powers.

She was frightened, but so aroused she couldn't stop moving against him, wondering what he was going to do to her.

And then he did something astonishing: he laughed, and did it again.

He clearly enjoyed it, the pain and pleasure mingling on his tongue, and Kagome cried out and clenched around him as he nipped her raw, crashing in to meet her only when she came a second time.

One day, she asked him if he didn't worry about siring a hanyou with her, just like his father had done.

Sesshoumaru shrugged, twining a lock of her hair around his fingers. "No," he told her.

"Why?" she asked, curiosity burning. The drugs she had injected into her arm simulated pregnancy, not sterility. If he could detect fertility, he would have stayed far, far away from her.

Sesshoumaru merely quirked an eyebrow. "And thus we find the advantage of laying with a miko," he informed her. "Your powers will kill any child before it is more than a week grown."

"Oh," she said. She expected to feel ill, but instead, Kagome felt only empty, and curiously disappointed.

Sesshoumaru leaned in and kissed the lock of hair he held, and heat crowded in again, banishing the emptiness.

One day, he asked her about her travels through time.

"Tell me again," he murmured between hot licks down the curve of her stomach, "how you managed to go back in time, hundreds of years, and neither die nor age?"

"I, um," she said muzzily. He was stroking some very interesting things with the safe curves of his knuckles, and all the blood in her body was clamoring to go where the action was.

"Yes?" he prompted after a moment, then planted a kiss on the inside of her thigh.

"I jumped into a well!" she cried.

"Mm," he said. The vibrations of his voice shuddered through her.

"There was a well in the shrine I lived at," she said, trying to keep her trembling voice steady, "and one day a mononoke pulled me through, and that was that."

"I see," he said. Sesshoumaru then flicked a tongue over her burning flesh, and Kagome let her brain short out.

"Do that again," she breathed, and Sesshoumaru obliged.

And the days blurred, so that she couldn't tell if it all happened in the span of a few hours, or the stretch of a century.

One day, she discovered that rubbing the skin behind his ear made him melt like butter in her hands.

One day, he nibbled on a toe, and Kagome exploded with delight.

One day, he tied her up, and had his way with her.

One day, they did nothing but tease each other into a frenzy.

One day, they fucked gently, and the next they both bled.

* * *

And then, one day, about a week after Kagome had locked them inside her apartment and pretended the outside world did not exist, Sesshoumaru casually made her want to die.

"I really wish you still had that big fluffy thing," she said, feeling almost playful in the post-coital glow. "It looked great on you, and would have been nice and soft." She was sitting up in bed and idly studying the light of the nighttime city as it flowed through her blinds and cast against her wall. If she concentrated, she could hear the dull roar of tires on pavement.

Sesshoumaru shifted next to her. "Are you suggesting I would have allowed you to use my father's heirloom pelt as a pillow?"

"Not just a pillow," she said. "I bet it felt good against skin."

"Hm," he replied. "That is not the most respectful of uses."

"You should get another one," she suggested.

"Because heirloom pelts are so plentiful."

"Any soft pelt would be good," she told him, eyeing him mischievously. "I'm not picky at all."

Sesshoumaru looked slightly disconcerted. "Hm," he said again.

"So... yes?"

The barest of creases formed between his brows. "I think not," he finally intoned, voice grave.

"Gah!" she cried, doing her best to suppress a happily astonished giggle. It wasn't often that she caused him to wobble on his axis. "Well if you aren't going to satisfy my needs for a large pelt of fur, I don't even know why I'm with you!" Flashing him a huge grin, Kagome flopped onto her back and stared contentedly at the ceiling. Mmm, she thought, laying down feels good. There was a pause in which there was the squeal of tires in the distance before Sesshoumaru spoke suddenly.

"I know why," the youkai said.

Yeah, except that was the truth. Not even I know why, except the sex is great, Kagome thought. "Oh really?" She was sleepily amused. "Enlighten me, then."

She thought he would say she was weak, or dependent. She thought he would tell her he was irresistible, or she was easily manipulated. She thought he would announce that she was just another human, becoming attached to things she couldn't hope to own. None of those explanations would have hurt her, because they were plausible, and might have even been true, and she had named each of them a thousand times in the middle of the night, after he had drifted off, and she had lain awake, watching his chest rise and fall.

So what he said was unexpected.

"You are waiting."

It took a moment for her to process those words, so unscripted were they, and then Kagome frowned, exasperation plucking at her. You really are impossible, she told him from the safety of her mind. "I'm waiting? For what? A train? The bus?"

She turned her head toward him, about to name more things she could be waiting for - the right guy, a miracle, Godot - but the words ran dry in her mouth, because he was staring at her as though judging something. Gauging her.

He looked deadly serious.

Kagome sat up, apprehension dawning. "For what? What do you mean, waiting?" she demanded.

I don't want to know, do I? I don't want to know. "What do you mean?" she insisted.

Sesshoumaru didn't move. He was utterly still, unwavering in his gaze, like a predator watching his prey. And then he opened his mouth and, with careless ease, tore her into tiny little pieces.

"You are waiting for someone to forgive you," he told her, "for Inuyasha's death."

The blood dried in her veins. She was no longer dreamy, but painfully, irrevocably awake.

"What?" she said, ridiculously, inanely. "What?"

"He died," Sesshoumaru told her, "because he became human. And why did he do that?"

Something was squeezing her chest, wringing the air from her lungs. She couldn't breathe, and everything had gone totally, horribly wrong.

No, no, no, she thought.

"Because... it was the right thing to do?" she said, voice hoarse.

The eyes locked on hers were almost pitying.

"No," he said. "That is not why."

And Kagome looked at him, really looked at him, at the inhuman points of his ears, the alien colors of his face and skin and hair, and heard the beat of his inhuman heart beneath it all, the one that spent centuries without succor, the one that endured with inhuman strength. She heard the words beneath the words, the ones to which she'd grown so good at listening for over the past month.

He died because of you, Sesshoumaru was saying.

You are the reason I am alone.

"Is that what you think of me?" she asked finally. It was funny - she would have thought she would be weeping, but there was nothing.

"It is what I know of you," he replied.

It is your fault, and I will not tell you differently.

And it was true.

As though he had disjointed her bones, opened her veins and drained her blood, peeled her muscles apart, sliced open her throat and loosed her breath, Kagome felt herself dying, and dying hurt so much she couldn't feel her brain. She couldn't feel her heart as it struggled uselessly. She couldn't feel anything, and yet was in agony.

And Sesshoumaru watched her suffer.

Then Kagome was on her feet - when had she risen? - the sheet wrapped around her, and she moved with bloodless limbs on bloodless feet, out of the room and closed the door behind her, away from the man who had just peeled off her skin and dismantled her with such thoughtless grace.

She moved to the couch and curled up, empty and raging inside, filled with the howling torment of limbo.

You are with me because you are waiting for someone to forgive you, and you hope it will be me.

It is your fault I am alone.

I do not forgive you.

Listless, restless, aching despair crept over her feet, oozed through her core, paralyzing her.

For the rest of my life, she thought dully, I will remember this moment. This is what it feels like to die and keep living. Her heart had broken before, but this was different. Everything was breaking. Everywhere inside her she cracked along fragile fault lines with the crystalline sound of shattering glass.

Curled into the fetal position, she waited for him to open the door, waited for him to come to her and take it back, waited for the end of the world, and she wept silent tears.

He never came, and she kept on weeping.

Some time during the night, she fell asleep and dreamed herself into a web of silver hair, into the middle of the ocean, in the cold, disturbing stillness beneath the ravenous waves, and Sesshoumaru floated in front of her, neither demonic nor angelic, but inhuman all the same, as luminous as any ghost seen drifting through the worlds.

Between them, he extended a hand, and Kagome saw he held within it pieces of a heart.

"Open your mouth," he instructed.

And when she obeyed, he drifted closer and placed the pieces on her tongue, like a profane sacrament, and the pieces were so bitter she couldn't tell if it was his heart, or her own.

The next day, the day before classes were set to start, Kagome woke up to find that Sesshoumaru was gone, and she was alone in the world once more.

* * *

There once was a fallen man.

Kagome was a girl who had never known fear, or hunger, or cold. She had never known toil, or drudgery, or slavery. Even Kikyou, dead now for good, her faithful, false body shattered a few feet away, had known some of these things, but Kagome was pure and beautiful, untouched by the ugliness of the world.

Looking into the eyes of Naraku, though, Kagome felt the creeping cold of the vile earth, knew the foul feelings of humanity, because Naraku, when he had been human, when he had been Onigumo, had known all those things, and more. Fear, hunger, cold, toil, drudgery, slavery, agony, desperation, hatred, envy...

He could never return to the pure child he had been, and because of that he wanted to destroy purity wherever he found it.

"Look around you," he was whispering in her ear, soft and seductive like a sick parody of a lover, and Kagome shuddered at the feel of his breath on her neck. Her power was burning him - she could smell the sick scent of burned flesh where he held her arms fast behind her back - but he was so powerful now, the completed Shikon no Tama around his neck, that his skin healed as quickly as she could sear it. Her struggles were fruitless, and she struggled hard, mad with grief.

"Look," he insisted, and she couldn't help but look, her eyes burning with dry tears, sobs shaking her whole body.

Miroku and Sango had died together. He had died of poison, and she had died of a razor sharp claw through her chest. Her heart had probably burst, killing her instantly. Kirara, faithful to her mistress to the last, lay crumpled only a few feet away. She had been disembowled.

Kouga had probably bled to death. His legs had been shattered and ripped to shreds for the last two shards, and only a few feet away from him Kohaku lay, limbs akimbo, like a rag doll.

The bodies of two children and a toad - Rin, Shippou, and Jaken - were battered and bloody at the edge of the forest.

And Kikyou - her rival and herself - in little pieces on the ground, pierced by so many angry tentacles that she had shattered. She had been aiming her bow straight at Naraku, threatening to pierce through Kagome to get to him when it had happened. Somehow, Kagome felt like she had lost her last ally.

It was the brothers that made her heart hurt the most, though. Sesshoumaru, white and pristine, his hair splayed around him like silver tendrils, was sprawled upon the ground, beautifully, deathly still, but it was what lay only a few feet away from him that made Kagome want to scream.

Far from her, in the middle of the battlefield, lay Inuyasha's body. A few feet further away was his head.

With the curious observance of grief, Kagome noted that the body still clutched the Tessaiga in its hand, as though that sword could save him now.

"You see what you have come to?" Naraku sighed in her ear.

Kagome couldn't speak. She never wanted to speak again, but yes, yes, she could see. That she could rip her eyes from her head, so she wouldn't have to see anything ever again, but her hands were still held in a viselike grip behind her.

"You see?" he said again, giving her a little shake.

She nodded, though the lump in her throat made it difficult.

"Beautiful," he whispered. "You see? You were unable to save them. How beautiful."

She was crying then, and he was licking her tears away, as though they were the finest wine dropping from her lashes.

She was the substitute Kikyou, purer and younger and just as pretty, and he was going to take her body as if he owned it, as if he owned everything the world.

In the back of her frantic mind, she wondered if she would be able to snatch the Shikon jewel away from him as he raped her.

"Ka - go - meeeeee," he crooned in her ear, and she could barely hear him over the sobs...

Something was stirring at the edge of her vision.

Movement meant life. Forcing her eyes open she looked straight at Sesshoumaru, climbing to his feet, not dead, just injured, and eyes glowing red. She offered up a silent prayer, don't let Naraku see him, save me, save us, don't let Naraku know until too late.

"Ah, Sesshoumaru," Naraku purred, in that horrible, taunting voice. "I see you are not as dead as I thought."

It was pain for him to stand, that much she could see. Even from thirty meters away she could hear the ragged edge of his breath, and in his chest there was something bubbling and rattling. It hurt to listen to it.

It seemed so unfair that Sesshoumaru was alive and Inuyasha wasn't. It wasn't fair.

Kagome sobbed brokenly, her powers flaring again, sizzling against her captor, but it was no use.

And Sesshoumaru wasn't doing anything. He was just standing there, looking at his brother's broken body, and the ragged, empty vessels of her comrades, at the sad little messes of the children, the dead little girl who followed him. But his gaze always returned to Inuyasha. There was no emotion on his face, save the red anger of his eyes, the void of his heart in his expressionless features.

Do something, she begged. Do something.

Slowly, as though he had all the time in the world, Sesshoumaru took Toukijin from the sash at his waist and drove it into the ground.

Naraku laughed. "Giving up?" he asked, but Sesshoumaru was already moving again, already smoothly removing the other sword, the sword she'd seen him use only once, from where it nestled at his hip, and drawing it out to rest in his hand.

"Naraku," he said. "I will never forgive you for forcing me to do this."

Oh, sweet mercy - Kagome thought, and then Sesshoumaru swung the blade of heaven, opened the gates between this world and the next, and there was a soft, silent explosion of blue light, spreading outwards.

"Oh," she exclaimed when it washed over her, warming her to the tips of her toes, and her purifying powers sparked and flamed, and behind her Naraku made a sound of pure agony.

He was still holding onto her, and she turned in his grasp to see his form dissolving, struggling to keep shape as all the youkai he had absorbed suddenly seemed to awaken from wherever they slept with in him, and now they were bubbling and frothing beneath the surface of his skin.

Kagome's stomach turned and turned but she wrenched a hand out of his grip, grasped the horrible black Shikon from where it lay against his undulating chest, and ripped it away.

Pain, pain, pain, clouding her mind as she fell away from him, as she fought the battle against the evil in the jewel, as she heard Inuyasha shout, and that horrible writhing thing was upon her, screaming with a thousand mouths. Kagome held fast to the jewel and spread her hand against the monster that was Naraku and burned him to the bone as her eyes rolled back in her head.

Hurry, Inuyasha. Kill him, she thought through the pain.

Beneath her fingers, the world caught on fire.

* * *

Kagome didn't cry over him, much.

She kept her eyes dry as she wandered aimlessly through her little, empty flat, picking up the things they'd both left strewn all over the place: books, pieces of clothing - only her own, he had taken the clothes she had bought for him with him - a scrap of paper here and there. Little things. She picked them up and put them away, in the nooks and crannies where they belonged, before he'd come into her life and meticulously torn it all apart. But that was over now, and she had to put things back the way they had been, and there should be no crying about it.

The little pile of library books made her feel a bit of a sting, high in her nose, but she picked them up and bundled them into the passenger seat of her little car, drove the few short miles to the library, and dropped them off. They were overdue about a week anyway. She'd have to pay that money later. Her savings was drying up, and Sesshoumaru had only hastened its end.

"Looks like I'll have to go back to working," she muttered under her breath as she sat in traffic. Kagome said those exact same words every year as summer came to a close. She worked for the times she went to school, and used summer to recuperate, with trashy novels and nights spent out with her friends, politely refusing drinks and then shooting a bit of bad whiskey when she went home alone.

She didn't feel rested this summer. She felt weary.

The funny thing was that, as sad and empty and lost as she felt, Kagome didn't really feel like drinking that first day. Like morphine, it was only a painkiller. It wouldn't heal the wounds, only dull the pain of them. That much she knew.

She didn't even feel like drinking the second day, when she went back to class, either, until she was humiliated for the third time for not having the correct books with her - too much time spent in the bedroom had kept her from tending to those duties - and none of her friends, angry with her for not returning their calls, would let her look over their shoulders.

Then she wished for nothing more than a pint of something very strong. Kagome went home and fed her cat, and then filled up her bathtub with warm water and climbed in.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

The water was sweet, though unfragranced, and Kagome found herself slumped against the back of the tub, staring listlessly at the white tiled walls and blaming herself for the things she did and didn't do.

I did this, and I didn't do this.

One of the things she did do was put the idea into Inuyasha's head that if he were to become human, they would be together, without the burden of the jewel to protect. One of the things she didn't do was take on the responsibility for protecting the completed Shikon jewel herself. If she had not done the first thing, and instead chosen to do the second thing, the outcome would have been completely different, though it was impossible to know whether or not she would be happy now.

Idly, she wondered if it was possible to become a creature made entirely from regret, and then she sighed, and sunk further into the warm water. She floated there, watching the tendrils of her hair weave against the tiny currents, and tried not to feel anything at all.

After a moment, the thought, if Inuyasha were alive, drifted unbidden across her mind, and she turned toward it.

If Inuyasha were alive. It didn't feel much like a little game any more; it felt like an accusation, or a sentence. Nevertheless, she was already thinking it.

If Inuyasha were alive, she mused, I wouldn't be alone. He would be here with me.

And then, Inuyasha wouldn't have left.

One small tear formed at the corner of her eye, and Kagome angrily dashed it away with a wet hand, leaving behind more water than before.

If Inuyasha were alive, I would never have known Sesshoumaru the way I did, she said to herself, defiantly, and that certainly was true. It was true as true could be.

Kagome tried not to think the thought that came after that, but her brain was so frazzled, so frayed at the edges that it was too much effort to keep that thought from completing itself.

Maybe it would have been better that way.

It hurt her heart to think that. Kagome resolved to never let it whisper to her again, and slumped further into the water, so that only the top part of her head was visible, and the only way she could breathe was through her nose, and thought about Sesshoumaru.

She thought about his long, beautiful hair, and the lovely arch of his cheeks. She thought of that little valley at the small of his back, and his luminous skin and eyes, and of all the things she loved about his body, the things she'd deemed harmless to love because they were just things, and then she thought about how they weren't there any longer, because he wasn't there any longer.

From the back of her throat, a noise escaped her, one that she hadn't meant to make and barely recognized as her own voice, and it startled her so badly that she sat up, splashing water over the sides of the bathtub and to the floor. Weirdly, it didn't stop.

High, keening, and sad, Kagome sat in the bathtub and listened with wonder to the sound she made with her grief.

This is the sound a dead person makes when they are still alive, she thought, and in her chest, her heart gave a painful lurch. Angrily, Kagome clapped a hand over her mouth, lest she continue to make such horrible music.

Shut up. Shut UP.

Her fingernails were biting into her cheeks, and she dug in and concentrated on that superficial pain.

Finally, after a few tense moments, she decided that it was safe again - the keening had stopped. Slowly, Kagome rose from the water, dried her body, dressed herself in a pair of pink pajamas, and tucked herself into the empty bed that still smelled like him.

Kagome closed her eyes and didn't cry over him, much.

* * *

Kayoko was the first of her friends to speak to her again, because she was the one who had heard Sesshoumaru's beautiful voice, and she was the one who suspected that things were far more than what they appeared on the surface. It was odd and funny to Kagome to be reminded of this fact, as though the universe was nudging her and saying, yes, he was real, he wasn't a phantom or a memory come to haunt you, and so when Kayoko pressed her about Sesshoumaru - who was he? what did he do for a living? where did they meet? were they really just friends, or something else? - Kagome found herself giggling maniacally and making up Sesshoumaru's inane history. It didn't matter if it was true or not, of course, because he was no longer around to confirm or refute it.

For one thing, his name was shortened, from Sesshoumaru to Sesshou, which, Kagome agreed under questioning, was a terrible name. She made up for it by stating that his father was a bit peculiar with the names he gave his children, and poor Sesshou's wasn't even the worst of the bunch.

"His little brother - the one I knew when I was in high school - "

"Half brother," Kayoko corrected her. They were sitting across from each other in the student center and sipping bottles of chilled water a week into the semester.

"- yeah," Kagome mumbled, chagrined. "Anyway, his name was Inuyasha."

"Urk," Kayoko said, sympathetically. "That is pretty bad."

Kagome nodded in sage agreement and sipped some water.

"So are you guys dating or what?" Kayoko said.

Kagome looked off to the side. "Or what," she replied, studying the ceramic tiles on the floor.

"Kagome-chan!" Kayoko huffed. "What does that mean?"

"It means that we were in a relationship, but I wouldn't call it dating," Kagome said, looking back at the eager, prying, earnest face of her friend. "And I don't think it would be polite to expand on that."

But Kayoko didn't seem to care about the depth of her relationship with Sesshou, with that false Sesshoumaru. "Were?" she said pointedly. "You were in a relationship?"

Humiliating. Like Inuyasha choosing Kikyou all over again. Except Sesshoumaru hadn't left her for someone else. Instead he'd just... left. Took her apart, and left her for dead. She couldn't decide which was worse, actually. Kagome bit her lip and nodded.

"The day before classes started, I woke up and he had left," she found herself saying, and oh, how it hurt.

"He didn't say why?" Kayoko said, aghast. "That jerk."

That much is also true, Kagome thought miserably. But I'm finding it harder and harder to blame him.

But Kayoko didn't know that part, the part where she was responsible for the death of his half-brother, the part where he had cruelly reminded her of that fact. Kayoko was digging in her purse, about to pull out the damage control.

"I know what you need," she announced to Kagome, and a tiny, silver cell phone appeared in her perfectly manicured hand. "A girl's night out."

"Oh, no," Kagome pleaded, "that's not necessary, I just want to go home and maybe read a book - "

"Nonsense!" Kayoko cried, and already she was punching in the numbers needed to call in the others.

For the first time in the entire summer, Kagome felt loved, and it was wonderful and frightening.

They took her out to a well-heeled sushi bar, slapped her hands away from her wallet, and cooed and petted and coddled her, asked her questions, and picked Sesshou, this fictional man, apart.

"So what did he do?" Arisu asked, gesturing grandly with her third glass of wine. "Like, careerwise."

Kagome, only drinking a soft drink, frowned, wracked her brains, and came up with a fairly plausible answer. "He was a kenjutsu instructor," she replied.

"What was he doing living with you?" Miyu demanded. "Didn't he have a place of his own?"

"Er... he was unemployed," Kagome amended quickly. She took a sip of her drink and stared down at her empty plate.

The waitress came around, and Kayoko ordered ice cream for everyone, over Kagome's protests.

"Well!" Miyu said when the waitress had gone away again, "He sounds like a no-good jerk. He sounds like he was just using you. Good thing you got rid of him."

"Damn straight," Arisu agreed, slamming back the rest of her wine. "You don't need a man like that anyway."

"Plus," Miyu put in, "he sounded like kind of a freak. White hair? Misako-san said he looked scary."

"Well he would look scary," Arisu reasoned, "if he was a master of kenjutsu."

"Hmmph," said Miyu.

"He sounded really cute," Kayoko interjected. "I wish I could have seen him." Turning to Kagome, she put a kind hand on her forearm. "Tell me," she said, "did he look as good as he sounded?"

Kagome sighed wistfully. "Ten times better," she said, staring into space. "He was beautiful."

The waitress returned and placed plates of ice cream in front of them as her friends gave a collective sigh of disappointment that they hadn't been able to lay eyes on this fine specimen of a man. Arisu shook herself out of it first. "Well," she said, clearing her throat, "this guy clearly wasn't worth your time, no matter how good he looked, or how nice he felt."

"Ari-chan!" Kagome exclaimed, slightly scandalized.

"It's true, it's true," Miyu chanted. "He was no good for you, Kagome-chan, no matter how good he was in the sack."

"He'd better have been damn good for you to have put up with him," Kayoko muttered. "Unemployed punk who doesn't even say goodbye."

She was blushing scarlet, and she supposed that her friends spoke the truth. Sesshoumaru was not someone one should bring home to one's family, but that still didn't stop the horrible ache, the crushing guilt she felt when she thought of him, and even when she didn't think of him.

"You know what you need?" Miyu was saying, waving her spoonful of ice cream around in perilous circles to prove her point. "You need a new boyfriend. A rebound boy. And I know just the guy."

"Oh, Miyu-chan," Kayoko said, burying her face in her hand. Kagome was struck with the distinct impression that this subject had been discussed at length without her knowledge.

She sighed. "You might as well tell me," she said, spooning a bite into her mouth.

"Yoshi, of course," Miyu replied.

Kagome was confused for a moment. "Wait, I thought you two were together?"

Miyu shrugged, as though it was of no consequence. "We broke up. He's still obviously all about you," she said, matter-of-fact. "Like I need that in my life! As if I can compete with you in another area!"

"Oh," Kagome said.

Arisu leaned in and patted her arm. "Just give it a shot," she said. "It can't hurt."

* * *

Arisu was wrong - it did hurt, a lot, but like so many other things in her life, Kagome found herself slipping into the sadness and the routine of it with little protest or problem, pushing all thoughts of Sesshoumaru from her mind as she did so. If she did slip up and remember him, the pain of it quickly corrected her, and she forgot him again. She couldn't even take his advice to remember the beginning of him, rather than the end - not because the advice was bad, but because it just hurt too damn much.

Her first re-date with Yoshi, three weeks later at the beginning of the fall, didn't go well. It was a horrible disaster, actually.

He took her out to dinner and a movie, the date Kagome had wanted Sesshoumaru to go on with her, the one they didn't do because he was a demon and she was a priestess, and she was completely wasted within an hour after she'd announced that dinner and a movie was their evening activity.

So Kagome sat across from Yoshi and listened to him make awkward small talk with himself, and the food they ate was flavorless in her mouth.

The movie was no better - it was a beautifully done film, but Kagome couldn't concentrate on the story or the characters, didn't care about anything in it. Across the screen a beautiful girl and a handsome man danced around each other, in love and never voicing it. He had killed her father, but it was an accident. She was pregnant with another man's baby. It was all very dramatic and operatic, and the entire time, Kagome could help but think, over and over, I know a better story. I know a better one.

In her head, she played the first act, where a girl fell through a well and met her destiny on the other side. She met a huntress, and a kitsune, and a monk, and a hanyou who had loved her in another life. They fought, and struggled, and finally conquered, and then, when they were most happy, the curse of that horrible jewel reached out and ripped it all away.

It was a good act. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. Kagome couldn't bring herself to play the second act, though, where that girl, now a woman, whom destiny had chewed up and spit out, met a beautiful youkai, who had been chewed up and spit out as well. In that act, they danced together, picked up the pieces of each other, and... then he left, the pieces of her still in his hand.

In the darkness of the theater, Kagome blinked away tears. That's not the ending, she thought. That's not any sort of proper ending at all.

She felt cheated.

How cruel, she thought, that it should end this way.

The lights came up in the theater and Yoshi, like a gentleman, assisted her to her feet, despite the fact that she was a girl who once shot demons out of the sky.

"What did you think of the movie?" he asked.

She smiled and nodded. "I liked it!" she said. "Thank you for taking me!"

Then Yoshi took her home, invited himself in, and kissed her, very gently, the way Sesshoumaru never did.

Kagome pushed him away, shaking her head. "I'm sorry," she mumbled, "It's too soon."

"What do you mean?" he insisted. "We've made love before!"

And Kagome was shocked to remember that was true. "That's - that's not it - " she stammered, trying to explain.

"If it's about that punk, he wasn't worth your time," Yoshi said firmly. "You're good, and kind, and sweet. He's nothing next to you."

Kagome stared at him with wide eyes, and then burst into horrified tears.

Yoshi was mortified, of course, and bustled around her, getting her water, and tissues, and just being so sweet and solicitous, so unlike the boy she remembered him being - why had she always had a thing for jerks? - that she cried that much harder. When she'd finally calmed down half an hour later, Yoshi looked scared and unhappy, and Kagome had given him a peck on the cheek and promised that she would go out with him again, because she had been a terrible date, and she was sorry.

He'd just nodded and ducked out, and hadn't called her again until three weeks later.

They'd gone out again - just to dinner this time - and he kissed her outside her door and fumbled inexpertly at her breast before she gently disengaged him, despairing in her mind. That was just another thing that was too different, too sudden, too marked. She wished him good night and went inside. They didn't have a third date.

During this time, Kagome studied and worked hard at her classes and the part time job she'd picked up for housekeeping services at a local hotel, and her friends were always dropping by, insisting she come with them to get coffee and study, or go browsing in a book store, or just window shopping. She tried to decline, but they were so well-meaning that she found it difficult. That was how she found herself, in mid-October, with three bottles of red wine, three giggling and slightly drunk friends, and that horrible blanket that she had wanted to burn after Sesshoumaru had walked out of her life.

"Kagome," Arisu was saying, "you don't have to date Yoshi-kun again! It's not like it was an order or anything like that."

Kagome shrugged. She'd had one glass of wine and it hadn't agreed with her, and as a consequence was not feeling as ebullient as her friends. The night was beautiful, but too reminiscent. The moon was waxing in the sky.

"And it's not like you can go back to Yoshi after having someone good," Miyu stated uncharitably, and Kagome, for once, was inclined to agree with her. She still dreamed about Sesshoumaru, nestled between her thighs, lavishing attention on her breast, on her throat, on the curve of her shoulder, his thumbs stroking down the muscles of her belly, squeezing her hips, and she always woke up, burning with desire and filled with a loneliness so horrible she couldn't begin to climb out of it.

In comparison, Yoshi had the moves of a wallaby.

Kagome found this amusing, and said so.

"I kno-ow!" Miyu groaned, placing a dramatic hand on her forehead. "Kagome-chan, why didn't you warn me? That wasn't nice to do to a friend."

Kagome shrugged, too embarrassed to admit that before Yoshi she'd never been kissed.

"Miyu-chan," Kayoko scolded mildly.

"Well, it's true," Miyu said. "That was just so... unexpected!"

"The point... the point," Arisu said, "is that... maybe you don't need a boyfriend. Just take it one day at a time, Kagome-chan. Soon, you'll forget all about old what's-his-face."

"Sesshoumaru," she said, forgetting to call him Sesshou, but her friends were too tipsy to notice.

"Yeah, forget about him," Kayoko said. "Move on with your life."

Kagome said she would, and an hour later she bundled them all into taxicabs to take them home before returning to the roof and wishing she had the stomach for more wine. She could have used the painkillers right then.

Fugue by Resmiranda

10/06/2004

I should gather up all my stuff, and take it inside. It would be the responsible thing. It was autumn, after all, the time when she needed to be taking care of her health rather than hanging around on chilly rooftops and mooning over things she couldn't change.

There's been no word from him for over two months, she thought. Her friends were right - it was time to move on. Sesshoumaru wasn't like Inuyasha in that he loved her, and would come to her if he were alive.

Kagome moved to the edge of the roof and placed her hands on the ledge, looking out over the city. Once, I lay with a youkai lord beneath the Tokyo moon, she thought, but it was no good. It still hurt.

She let her eyes drift closed, and let her mind become blank.

She was so tired, so tired of missing him, of waking up in the middle of the night, so tired of knowing how much of the burden she shared. Just like when she had finally landed in the modern era for the last time, she had to accept that he wasn't coming back. Only this time, it was because of her, and not because of the jewel.

Casting her eyes downwards, Kagome studied the little pebbles in the concrete, and, peeking at the edge of her vision, the little alley below.

Wow, she thought, breathless against the warm back, clad in fire-rat fur. So this is flying! Around her his white hair whipped, stinging her cheeks, and his warm arms wrapped around the crook of her knee made her squirmy in weird places. But none of that mattered, on the back of this strange boy, as he flew through the air like it was nothing.

Beneath her, the alley dipped and plunged, and Kagome felt a brief moment of vertigo, as though the world had picked her up and swung her about, and then set her back down again.

She drew back.

Tired of missing Inuyasha, tired of needing Sesshoumaru, Kagome looked out on the city, from the rooftop where she had sought an end to sorrow and found a font of it instead, and made a decision.

No more. No more. This is me, moving on.

It felt okay. Decent. Sucking a draft of air through her teeth, Kagome exhaled and felt lighter, lighter than she had in weeks. It would be hard, but she would let go, and she would make herself happy, in the here and now, and not in the past. The first thing I'm going to do, she thought, is call Yoshi.

Resolved, rejuvenated, Kagome turned around to pick up her things, and saw Sesshoumaru standing not ten feet away, beautiful and white and pure in the light of the moon.

Oh, she thought.

Oh...

Time lay down, and was still.

Before she could open her mouth, or react in any way, he crossed the asphalt, brushed his knuckles across her cheek to catch a tear she hadn't even known was shed, ran a warm, smooth thumb over her lips, and rendered her speechless.

She looked up at him with wide eyes.

Sesshoumaru, luminous in the silvery moonlight, leaned down and caught an earlobe between his teeth, swirling his tongue over the shell of her ear, warm breath curling down through her body and coming to rest in her toes. And then he spoke.

"Take me," he murmured, "to the well."

* * *

There once was a hanyou.

This is it, she thought. This is the moment of truth. I can't believe we made it! It was so strange to know how close they had come to losing it all - if it hadn't been for the legacy of Inuyasha's father, none of them would be alive right now except for her, and she would probably be wishing she was dead. Kagome pushed those horrible thoughts from her mind, because they made her feel helpless and paralyzed again, when in reality she had done just as much to erase Naraku from the face of the earth as Inuyasha had, and it had been she who had purified the jewel, had made it unrecognizable from the poisonous black pearl it had become.

They stood beneath the leaves of Goshiboku, in the early autumn light. It was a golden light, rich and warm like honey, rather than the flat yellow stuff that had followed them through their journey, chasing them in and out of summer like a plague or a sickness. Strange, now that the jewel was pure again, how much everything seemed to change. Strange how suddenly Miroku was free, and Sango had her brother, and they were so happily awkward around each other now, courting each other with fumbling shyness and an earnest spirit. Strange how Shippou clung to them, giving Kagome her space. Strange how everything seemed just right, and it was just so.

She wasn't about to begin questioning it. Just go with it, she thought. There's no such thing as too good to last when you've gone through so much. Someone had to be watching. Something has to go right.

High above, Kagome heard the scratchy rustle of leaves losing their moisture, letting loose their green beauty, melting into golden and orange. In a month, they would be dry and flaky, just little bones, brown, burned skeletons of their former selves, dead on the ground. And then they would sleep, and dream, and then be reborn in the spring.

Did it really only take one season? she wondered. Did it really only take a summer?

Inuyasha stood, gazing up at the scar he had left on the tree, and Kagome thought he had never looked so nostalgic, or so grown-up, in that moment. She wondered if he was thinking of

Kikyou. Funny how she didn't feel threatened or sad considering Kikyou - she wondered if that happened with all one's enemies when they crossed the border between the living and the dead.

Or maybe that just happened with one's predecessors. In a way, she would miss the other miko. They hadn't spoken in any truly meaningful way, but she had still been a part of her, even when they were at odds.

"Kagome."

She looked up, startled out of her reverie. "Eh?" she said, taking a step toward him. "Yes, Inuyasha?"

He turned his head in her direction, and stared at her with his pretty yellow eyes. Kagome thought she could be lost in them, if he gave her the opportunity.

Then he took another step, turning himself fully toward her, and looked - really looked - her straight in the eye.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

And she thought of all the times he'd saved her life, all the little kindnesses he'd done for her and the others, all the compassion he held behind that angry face, and she nodded.

With care and reverence, mindful of all the people who had died so that she could stand, here and now, beneath the sacred tree with him, Kagome reached out and removed the rosary, wrapping it around her hand. Then she untucked the Shikon no Tama from where it hid beneath her green and white uniform, unlooped it from around her neck, and held it out to him.

Clawed fingers grasped the glass ball, and Inuyasha brought it to his face, to study it.

"All those people," he murmured after a moment, and shook his head. Kagome knew exactly how he felt.

And then he looked at her again.

"Kagome," he said, and he was more serious than she'd ever heard him be, "you have to tell me: is this what you really want?"

The enormity of the question should have made her tremble, should have made her quake with fear and awe, but she felt nothing except joy, and a little bit of regret. She loved him, here and now, the way he was, ears and hair and claws and eyes and all, and yet how could the world know peace if the jewel was allowed to exist? He could erase it all, and she would be there to hold him up, soothe him, reward him for his sacrifice.

"It is," she told him, feeling as though her heart would burst in her chest. "It's the right decision."

Whether or not Inuyasha agreed that it was the right decision, Kagome would never know. Silently, he closed his fist around the Shikon no Tama, that little thing that looked so innocuous and that had caused so much pain, and shut his eyes.

Kagome saw him make a wish, in the breathless eternity of the moment.

Then he opened his hand, and the Shikon no Tama was gone.

And then he opened his eyes, and they were already fading, becoming muddy with grey, and his hair was turning from white to black.

Human, she thought. I think I will miss the ears the most.

And in the space of a moment, the transformation was complete, and Inuyasha saw, for the first time as a human being, the world in the light of day.

"Wow," he said.

"Mmhm," she replied, looking around.

"Beautiful," he said.

She was about to agree when she looked back at him, and found him staring at her with happily astonished eyes, like a boy - or a man, he looked so much older now - who had suddenly discovered a secret, sacred thing, and was grateful for the honor.

"Inuyasha - " He looked so handsome and sweet. She itched to hold him.

"Beautiful," he repeated.

And then Kagome broke and ran to him, put her hands on his shoulders, and tilted her face up to kiss him on his sweetly astonished lips -

- only to find herself stumbling, suddenly off balance, and to her endless, utter horror, she passed right through him, as though he were nothing more than an illusion.

"What?" she said, suddenly shocked, afraid as she regained her footing behind him. "What's happening?"

"Kagome?" he said.

"Inuyasha!" she cried, and saw him turn, and he was fading now, transparent, like smoke in the wind. He was disappearing before her very eyes.

"Oh, no," she whispered. "Please, oh, no."

His lips were moving now, but no sound was coming out, and all around her the forest was suddenly gilded in concrete, was suddenly a shrine and not a forest after all, and she ran to the almost invisible figure.

"I love you," she said, hands passing through his face, through his chest, through his hands, needing to touch him, needing to hold him more than anything else in the world, and knowing that it was now impossible. "I love you."

He couldn't hear her, and she landed in the modern day, never to see him again. It wasn't all for nothing, but it was so little of something that it felt like nothing, and her skin tingled where she had passed through him.

Hours later it was her brother who found her, curled under Goshinboku in the rain and soaked through to the bone.

* * *

There once was a girl named Kagome, and there once was a demon king.

Strangely enough, it didn't dawn on her to be angry until they reached the alabaster steps that led to the shrine, and she didn't have hold enough of her wits to express that anger until Sesshoumaru was already halfway up. But when her body did catch up with her mind, it was ready.

Kagome stamped her foot. "Hey," she hissed up at him, hands clenched into fists at her sides. "What the hell is going on? Who the hell do you think you are?" The effect of her anger was marred by the fact that she spoke in a whisper so as to not attract the attention of her family or any curious passers-by.

Sesshoumaru stopped and pivoted in place, the hakama he had chosen to wear flaring slightly dramatically around his legs. He looked like an upperclassman, startled by an uppity servant. He opened his mouth.

"What?" he said. He sounded genuinely puzzled.

"You," she said, very emphatically and very quietly, "can't disappear for almost three months, and then turn up, stick your tongue in my ear, and demand that I take you to the shrine. Where's my damn apology?"

The youkai blinked, and then, very gracefully, leapt down the flight of stairs to come to a rest in front of her.

"You didn't like my tongue in your ear?" he said.

Kagome barely repressed the urge to scream.

"That is not the point," she seethed. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Out," he answered, still looking puzzled. Something seemed to dawn on him. "Were you worried about me?" he asked.

And hurt, and depressed, and every horrible thing in between, she thought, but, for the sake of a quiet life, she just crossed her arms. "Yes. I was," she told him as coolly as possible.

"Oh," he said.

Then he turned and began to leap up the stairs again.

"Wait!" Kagome said shrilly. "Aren't you even going to say sorry?"

A slight exasperation showing on his face, Sesshoumaru turned and looked at her again. "I give you my apology," he said, a little sharply, and then continued up the stairs.

Kagome passed a hand across her eyes, trying to wipe away the anger and frustration, and followed him.

They had walked to the shrine. Or rather, Sesshoumaru had leapt, and she had ridden on his back, too shocked that he was suddenly there again, and too thrilled at the feel of him against her body to say anything as they flew towards her childhood home. He had declined to answer questions, merely looked straight ahead and ignored her. It would have hurt if she hadn't been so ridiculously, pathetically happy to see him.

She was so pitiful. Don't leave me again, was what she wanted to say to him now, as she trudged after him, up the steps. Stay with me.

He met her at the top of the stairs, arms folded into his sleeves, and long, silver hair tossing gently on the cool breeze.

She wanted to crawl inside his clothes and curl up against him. She wanted to sleep for days.

"It's over here," she said quietly, suddenly drained and no longer angry, but just tired.

Sesshoumaru followed her as she crossed the courtyard, his footsteps matching hers as she paced across the stones, as steadily as possible, to the well house.

Kagome had not been inside the well house for years. She'd last tried jumping into the past when she was eighteen years old, and had earned a broken ankle for her folly. She'd said farewell to it, and to all the things it represented, only three weeks later, and then she'd left it behind. If she were to be true, though, she had never really bid it adieu; she was always hoping and wishing that one fine day a dark head with stormy grey eyes would peek over the side, and take her hand, and kiss her back to life again.

That never happened though.

Gingerly, Kagome placed her hands on the doors and slid them open.

"Here," she said.

Sesshoumaru walked forward, and descended the stairs. Outside, the moon was bright enough to cast an eerie light inside the old structure, and Kagome found herself slightly apprehensive, as though something was about to happen. The light and the shadows and the shining demon who had come to a rest in front of the enchanted well all conspired to take her breath away.

Quietly, Kagome stepped down the rickety wooden steps, and moved to his side.

She looked at him from the corner of her eye, and wondered what he was thinking.

He was so still and stoic, his face in shadow, his shining hair almost glowing in the light. He could have been thinking about anything in that moment - about the little girl he raised from the dead, or the toad who served him faithfully, or the brother he loved and hated - or nothing. He could be drifting in a sea of fog, loving nothing, needing nothing, wanting nothing - just a youkai who shunned memory.

"You say," he broke the silence, "that you just jump in, and it takes you to the past?"

Kagome nodded, heart twisting painfully. "Only Inu - Inuyasha and I could go through it, but that's all we had to do. It doesn't work any more, though."

In the moonlight, he turned his face slightly toward her, so she could see his golden eyes glowing, and feel the shadow of his smirk. Or perhaps he was merely looking at her, calm and collected as always, and she was imagining his mocking look. Either way, it didn't seem to matter.

"Hmm," he said. "Tell me, miko - what is your memory of this place?"

Kagome closed her eyes.

"Once," she said, searching for the words, and finding them wanting. How could she describe this? "Once, I was pulled down a well by a mononoke, and I met my fate on the other side."

Next to her, she heard him breathe out, very quietly.

"Ah..." he whispered.

Kagome thought of a fading boy, and a monk and a huntress, now a nation of only two, and a little kitsune, growing up.

What would they think of me? she wondered. Would they even recognize me now?

She ached, with every bone in her body, to forget the girl she had been, and to forget the people who had loved her.

Too much love stifled. Too little starved.

And then there were strong hands on her waist, and her stomach dropped down between her toes as Sesshoumaru took her in his arms - pressed against her, warm and sweet and hard and please - and leapt into the well.

There was no magic, so Kagome knew that they were still in the present time, but there was no way for Sesshoumaru to know that. Next to her, he turned and looked up, up the long dark tunnel to the moonlight, up the long, empty years to where he had ended, and Kagome, gazing at his face, recognized the expression there.

In profile, in softly illuminated shadows, she saw his brow crease ever so slightly, as if in worry. His eyes were wide, searching; his lips were parted, as if to allow a sharp intake of breath, in fear or surprise. He looked afraid, troubled, and overlaying it all was a look of such heartbreaking hope that she felt her own heart stop in sympathy.

She recognized it, because she had felt it so many times before.

Sesshoumaru gazed up the tunnel of the well, gazed down the years, and longed.

Kagome was reborn.

As if she'd risen from ashes, as if she'd passed over a boundary she'd never known was there, she was renewed, resurrected. All the need and sadness in her soul, all the long-cherished desire and despair suddenly dissipated, suddenly drew her heart out into the moonlight, and gave it new life.

It wasn't a dream, she thought. He remembers, too.

He remembers.

Then he lowered his face and looked at nothing, and the moment had passed; the strange bubbling laughter and brimming tears seemed out of place next to his stoic facade, so she just took a deep breath and sighed.

"I know you don't believe me," she said, graciously ignoring the moment of his greatest weakness, the moment in which she found herself again, "but it really did used to lead to the past."

He turned and gazed at her, and she thought he had never looked so breathtaking as right then.

"I know," he said softly. "I believe you."

Kagome nodded, and then he took her in his arms again. The world dipped and turned again, and then they were back inside the well house.

Sesshoumaru didn't even look at the well. Instead he spoke. "Take me to the tree," he said. "The one where Inuyasha slept."

So Kagome took him to Goshinboku.

They stood there for a long time in silence, Sesshoumaru as opaque and silent as ever, and Kagome thinking of things past.

Quietly, she stood, and found that revelation didn't last very long, for she was sad again, and there was a question, haunting her, to which she had to know the answer.

"Tell me," she said, her voice sounding flat and strange in the quiet, "why you told Naraku you would never forgive him for making you use Tenseiga."

Next to her, Sesshoumaru shifted, very slightly.

"Naraku," he said, "forced me to revive him."

Kagome didn't have to ask to know to whom he was referring. And she knew, without being told, the secret he had kept from her.

"You..." she said, trailing off, unsure of what to do, or how to proceed. "You... could have brought him back."

He said nothing,

"You could have revived him. It wasn't too late. You could have brought him back." Her tone wasn't accusing, only surprised.

High above, the leaves rustled.

"Yes," he said finally, softly. "Do you hate me now?"

Was it a kindness, or a cruelty? she wondered. Was it the right thing to do?

Was there any way to know?

And she imagined him, standing over the corpse of the boy who was his blood brother, the favored son who was given the gift of mortality. She imagined him standing with the blade of life, his own poor substitute for dying, clutched in his hand. She imagined him smelling disease, and decay, knowing that even should he raise him, there was nothing left for his brother in this world. She imagined him glancing around at the thing his brother had become, the humans old and young, bent and broken, toothless and haggard, toiling and trudging beneath the sun.

She imagined him resheathing his blade, and walking away.

She wondered how much it had hurt.

"No," she said, finally. "No, I don't hate you."

She thought she heard him sigh, very slightly, and then it was lost in the autumn breeze.

There was a lump in her throat. Do you need forgiveness, like me? she wondered. Are you bent beneath the weight of it?

But she didn't ask those questions. "Is this really how it was meant to be?" she asked instead, staring at the leaves.

She'd meant it as a rhetorical question, but he answered her anyway.

"It doesn't matter," he replied. "This is the way it is."

Kagome nodded. "Yes," she said. "Yes, it is."

Somewhere in the distance, thunder rumbled.

"So," she said finally. "Where did you go?"

"Out," he said.

"What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to go home," he replied.

"With me?"

"Yes."

Kagome sighed, despairing, joyful. There was one more thing she needed to know before she could leave this tree, leave this behind her, and it was the hardest question she had ever asked.

"Are you going to leave me?" she said, very softly, knowing he would hear her.

There was a long pause, before he finally answered. "Yes."

In his voice, there was regret, and hope.

"But not right now," she added for him, since there were some things to which he would never admit first.

He laughed softly. "No," he replied, tone low and quiet. "Not right now."

A long time ago, the Kagome of the past would have wanted to know into how many pieces he would shatter her life. She would have wondered how badly she would miss him when he was gone, how many tears she would have cried because of it, how much she would wish to die. The Kagome of the past would have wondered how thoroughly he was going to break her heart.

But that Kagome was gone, and this Kagome stared up at the branches of Goshinboku, barely visible against the night sky. This Kagome placed a hand against her own fluttering breast, and wondered how thoroughly she would break his.

"I guess you should have picked a youkai," she told him at last.

She expected him to point out that there weren't any, that she was barely a choice at all, but he didn't. Instead, he sighed a little. "The end result would be the same," he said softly. "She would die, and I would go on."

And Kagome thought of him, alone and lonely, at the end of the world.

She had her answer. Carefully, deliberately, she turned toward him, grasped his shoulders, and pinned him to the sacred tree.

Then she kissed him.

He stood very still, as though shocked into silence, and she poured into him all the things she'd found because of him. She pulled him with her, into the light, into a sunlit country, where she had become herself again, and it didn't matter that he didn't return it, because she was bestowing a benediction.

I forgive you, she thought as she kissed him. I forgive you.

And then, just as she was about to pull away, he kissed her back, sliding his warm hands over her back and into her hair, pulling her flush against him, mouth open and seeking, blindly fumbling toward her, finding her, setting her aflame, and together they rose out of the fire.

After eternity, they pulled back, and Kagome gazed up at him.

He was looking down at her, golden eyes shining in the darkness, beneath the shedding branches of Goshinboku, beneath the dying, chilling autumn sky, beneath the grey clouds of the coming winter.

"I am not Inuyasha," he said quietly.

Kagome laughed, and kissed him again.

"Good," she told him when she broke away, thrilled and fluttery, giddy and sad, lost and found again. "Good."

He smiled.

And then she took his hand in hers, and together they went home.

~* fin *~

Fanfic Source: http://dokuga.com/spark/story/886/1